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AUT CÆSAR AUT NIHIL

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AUT CÆSAR AUT NIHIL

BY THE
COUNTESS M. VON BOTHMER

AUTHOR OF 'GERMAN HOME LIFE' ETC.

'Beware the Ides of March !
'He is a dreamer ; let us leave him : Pass !'
SHAKESPEARE

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON
LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
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THE THIRD VOLUME.



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AUT CÆSAR AUT NIHIL.



CHAPTER XXXI.

ALONE.

THE story of Esther's address to the people could not fail to get wind. A mob is a rare thing in Russia. Some strong superstition, some long smouldering resentment, or, more likely still, excessive potations of the blood-poisoning *vodki*, must be at the back of any popular tumult not directly inspired. The comments Society made were varied and curious.

Esther was heartily ashamed of the fuss caused by a very simple matter. In cool blood the thing, or at least the part she had taken in it, appeared to her melodramatic, not to say vulgar. 'Please say no more about it,' she cried; 'I feel as little of a heroine as possible. Had the audience been different, what I

did would have been in the worst possible taste. My blood was up at the thought of my poor, inoffensive Chelanska, a creature who would not hurt a fly, falling the victim of blind prejudice, and I did not stop to think of the criticism of cool blood. They were afraid of me, that was all. They were silent and sulky until Helena Perowska spoke. Then one saw the real Russian humility and devotedness to its recognised and lawful masters. They were conquered and subdued, and one could see that they loved their conqueror.'

'It always seems to me so strange,' said Lord Dovedale—who in his solicitude had flown at the first rumour of the peril she had passed through to Esther's side—'that Russia and England should be supposititious enemies. Both nations are chiefly distinguished by their colonising powers, and by their absorption of other nationalities; both have been the apostles of civilisation, though it may have been at the point of the sword. There is enthusiasm and fervour in Russia, enough and to spare; and the spirit of conquest, which is supposed to be a legacy left to the Romanoffs by the problematical testament of Peter the Great, has its parallels in the history of our own past

ambitions. Then that beautiful and impressive custom which permits the lowest in the land to speak to his social superior without prefix or title; which makes "Alexander, the son of Nicholas," a more solemn mode of address than any amount of ornamental titles could possibly be. Feudalism has died out in France; in Germany it is to a great extent undermined, or artificially maintained; in England it only exists in a modified form, and more as a matter of social precedent, than as a popular sentiment or a lawful prerogative; and yet the jealous and protective feeling of great landowners, with us, for their dependents, brings them, in a sense, on to the same platform as the childlike sentiment which the Russian peasant bears to the lord of the soil, fusing, as it does, two extremes, which the French proverb, not altogether falsely declares, "*se touchent*." The lower orders in both countries are tea and spirit-drinkers, whilst dissent from the State religion finds the same sectarian spectre stalking the land here as there; for, if I am rightly informed, there are no less than eleven thousand Dissenters from the Orthodox Greek Church, in Russia!

'Doubtless, my daughter, it was well to

save the shedding of innocent blood,' said the Countess Helena's confessor, 'and the gracious gifts that Providence has bestowed on you are well employed in soothing angry feelings. But if the woman really be a Jewess, our people do well to see in her one of those who stood by consenting, if they did not actually help, to crucify our Lord.'

Fräulein Fest, in the depths of her simple soul, hoped fervently that the increase of anxiety and the delighted pride and enthusiasm Lord Dovedale showed on Esther's behalf might soften the hardness of the young lady's heart, and cause her to incline a favourable ear to his wooings. Such adventures as this last would then be impossible. The fair Esther would have a dominant, sensible person at her side ; besides, matrimony tames even the wildest spirits.

To Graham the vision of Esther, as she stood up in the carriage fired with generous indignation—fearless, undaunted, eloquent—seemed like that of an inspired priestess denouncing the base impulse of a faithless folk. Beautiful as he had always known her, opportunity had not hitherto afforded him the chance of realising how noble, how almost sublime,

that beauty might become under transcendent emotion. Had the people turned on her and rent her, had they flung stones and filth at her in their brute rage, as he would not have been surprised to see them do, he felt that her action would have still been the same. Beauty such as hers could scarcely in itself touch the multitude. But what her rare and radiant loveliness might have failed to effect, the noble rage, the impulsive courage, the generous scorn and indignation of her words had, as though by magic, accomplished. The colour had risen to her pale cheeks, the veil that she had unconsciously torn from her face showed her eyes glowing and flashing with eager emotion ; her attitude, the movement of her arms, the hand she had held up in warning, the very changeful tones and varying accents of her voice, all were inspired by intense feeling, and marked that measured grace, and perfect harmony and balance, which when caught and eternalised, ‘enchants the world.’ She was as one transfigured. She might decry herself, make little of the occasion ; blush and disclaim any merit other than that of presence of mind ; ridicule the notion of courage ; but the picture impressed on Graham’s memory was one of great

nobility, harmony, and beauty; and had she failed, he told himself it would have been the same. And yet, so often as he mentally recalled the scene, Something came between him and his remembrance of it; a Something vague, impossible, disquieting, touched with the influence of other times and associations, which refused to be reduced to a concrete shape, but floated dimly and mistily on the confines of memory, like the sentiment of pre-existence, tormenting us by its elusive intimations.

Bianca, who was glad of any subject that dispensed her from writing about herself, sent a whole history of the scene in the *faubourg* to her mother. ‘Mr. Graham shares, as hero, with the heiress, as heroine, in the notoriety of the moment. It is said that the people, who recognised in her and Countess Helena Perowska their greatest benefactors, attempted to take the horses out of the carriage next time they drove through that quarter of the town. Indeed, their acclamations were so loud that the ladies were afraid the horses would take fright. As for Mr. Graham, though he does not know a word of Russ, he too is quite a god with the populace. They now say he did a generous thing in endeavouring to save a

poor woman. If she had been rich, there would have been in their eyes no merit in saving her. They even forget that the woman is a Jewess in their admiration of the Englishman's bravery. People say that the heiress must now take Mr. Graham, or decide in favour of Lord Dovedale, whose aunt is here on a visit at the embassy. Lord Dovedale is living at an hotel, his diplomatic duties having ceased long ago, and it is said that the young lady must soon make up her mind, as old Lady Rockminster has declared she will not leave St. Petersburg without her nephew! But you know how idle people turn everything into ridicule. And we are very idle here, for of gossip and making reports, with Russians there is no end.'

Poor Hero, sitting by her desolate hearth, never doubted but that her reign was at an end, and she was frank enough to own that she was rightly served. She would have sacrificed the man she loved, to her child. Her child had sacrificed her. Graham was right. He was certainly unconscious of her faithlessness, and now he would never know it; but, not so much as in thought, had she a right to reproach him.

During this dreary winter Fitz was the only person who seemed to think she needed cheer-

ing. Then, when his duties recalled him to Oxford, he, in departing, asked a favour of her.

‘My mother is altered of late,’ he said; ‘and I am anxious about her. Would you look her up sometimes and tell me, truly, what you think of her? She lives too much alone. You know she never cared to make friends. If you could only persuade her to drive out for an hour or so every day, it would do her good, and break the monotony of her life.’

And Hero, to whom Fitz had become a sort of providence, readily promised. She was thankful for anything in the guise of duty to others, that should save her from her self. Her existence was evidently doomed to be henceforth in the shade. But she could strive to encourage others to crawl into the sunshine, if for them sunshine should be feasible.

She expected no thanks; she did not even expect civility, much less kindness. But if Fitz desired it she would go to see Mrs. Fitzgerald.

She sent her name up, and was admitted.

‘What have you come for?’ asked the terrible old woman.

She was sitting with a shawl wrapped round her head, and reminded Hero of the wolf in little ‘Red Riding Hood.’ Her face was very

long, her nose pointed, and her eyes looked alarmingly suspicious and fierce.

‘To see you.’

‘I am not much to look at.’

‘Fitz would like to know how you are.’

‘So you are to act the spy?’

‘He does not like leaving you.’

‘Then why does he?’

‘His duties, I suppose, force him to go.’

‘He need have no duties.’

‘A man without occupation is a wretched creature.’

‘My son is much obliged to you.’

‘It is very good of you to let me in,’ said Hero, determined to be amiable.

‘It is. But I may as well tell you at once that I have made my will, and shall not alter it.’

‘That is a good thing. One should always make one’s will, they tell me, with all one’s faculties about one.’

‘You seem to know a great deal about it,’ said the old woman suspiciously. ‘Legacy-hunters needn’t come after me.’

‘That is well.’

‘Of course it is well. Other old women keep toadies. Or they dole out a pittance to

some poor relation that they may have a victim to tyrannise over.'

'Or, perhaps, a grateful heart to regret them.'

'Stuff, they want flattery. I could have dozens of people toadying me if I cared for it; but I don't.

'I can well believe that,' said Hero, whose heart was softened towards this desolate woman, boasting of the attention she could buy; 'with a son like Fitz you need care for nothing.'

'That is exactly what I say. Not but that Fitz is quite wrong if he imagines I cannot change my mind. Lots of people would be glad to step into his shoes and jump at the money he despises.'

By which Hero could see that Fitz had resented the threats employed as an argument.

'For Heaven's sake do what you like with your money, mother,' he had said to her more than once. 'I cannot love you more because you have so many hundreds or thousands a year. Love cannot be bought, though flattery may. I love you and value you, because I am your son. I have as much to eat and drink, and as good clothes to wear, as a man needs; more I do not desire. Leave your money to

whomsoever you like ; I shall not dispute your will ; only do believe that if I try to please you, it is because I desire to make you happy, not for anything I may get out of you. That may do for strangers, for the people you call toadies ; but not for your son, not for your own flesh and blood. If I offend you I am very sorry, but I should have to offend you all the same, though all the gold of Ophir lay heaped on one side and destitution on the other.'

To him it seemed most pitiful that the simplest act of kindly feeling should be attributed by his mother to mercenary motives, and that she could not even absolve her own son from having interested views. He would fain have seen her surrounded by friends, the generous patron of young people, who might be made happy by such trifling pleasures, and whose cheerful chatter would bring a sense of life and happiness to her declining years ; but her bitter tongue drove all but the interested away from her. If, as seemed likely, he should never marry, the house would grow yearly more desolate ; for Mrs. Fitzgerald had never cared to win friends by acts of simple kindness and good-fellowship, such as are needful to many natures ; and had estranged most of her

acquaintances by the ruthlessness with which she rode rough-shod over their little weaknesses, and inoffensive beliefs and affections.

‘Do you want anything of me?’ she asked, as Hero rose to go.

Her visitor might have answered: ‘A little affection;’ but she shrank from the cynical retort that would inevitably follow.

‘Nothing,’ she answered, smiling.

‘Nor that girl of yours? If she had played her cards better she——’

‘Bianca has even returned me a sum of money which I had set apart for her use.’

‘You must be very rich.’

‘I am.’ Poor woman! and she was starving for a word of love.

‘Then why don’t you live in a better house? My coachman pretended not to know the way when I told him to drive past your door one day.’

‘I am only rich in the sense of wanting no more than I have,’ Hero answered. ‘I have no means of spending the money I have.’

‘Then why do you go on as if you were a pauper? Though I suppose Owen can spend any amount for you, unless he’s very much changed.’

‘I should not care to have the smartest

house in town, in the best neighbourhood. That is what I call being rich—or very poor—when one is utterly indifferent.’

‘And yet you let that girl go out as a governess?’

‘Nay,’ said Hero. ‘I neither let—nor hindered. There was no reason, except that she wished it, for Bianca’s leaving home; and there is less reason even than there was for her staying away, except that she wishes it. We are rather lonely women, aunt, both you and I.’

‘Stuff!’ said Mrs. Fitzgerald.

Her conscience was not altogether easy. She remembered, with a twinge, all the nasty things she had said to estrange the daughter from her mother; how she had tried to lower and be-little Hero in Bianca’s eyes, by making her out a hypocrite and a tyrant. It had amused her to fight and quarrel with the girl: she knew that it annoyed Fitz.

‘See what a little spitfire she is!’ she said to him over and over again; ‘and how shamefully badly brought up! To think how blind and stupid men are; and you, who vaunted them to me as a model mother and daughter!’

Bianca’s indifference to Fitz was her one

redeeming point in his mother's eyes. She was furious that he wished the girl to go home to her mother, and she resented the proposition as a personal injury. Bianca had never written to her since leaving. Curiosity, Mrs. Fitzgerald's second ruling passion, prompted her to make inquiries, but even of Fitz she would ask nothing, and pride kept her silent.

‘Good-bye, again,’ said Hero.

But her aunt found it more convenient to turn her back on the proffered hand, and on pretext of ringing the bell ignored Hero's adieu.

‘I shouldn't worry myself about the young hussy, if I were you,’ she shouted to her visitor, now half-way downstairs; thus firing a Parthian shot after her, for the servant's edification.

But Hero's life had shrunk within such narrow boundaries, that she returned to Portland Place within a week, glad to have even the semblance of a duty to fulfil. A feeling of intense pity filled her, as she sat patiently listening to Mrs. Fitzgerald's monologues, for such the attempts at conversation usually became, after a faint struggle on Hero's side to keep the dialogue going.

With a son of whom any mother might have been proud, the hard old woman was yet

utterly miserable. None the less miserable because she denied the fact even to herself. Jealousy of everyone and everything he liked made her rude to his friends, just as it had caused her to insult Dr. Fitzgerald's patients, and had lost him many a good *pratique* during his lifetime. If Hero, thinking to please her, spoke kindly of Fitz, his views, opinions, or recorded experiences—'Oh, I know all about that,' closed the conversation with a steel snap. She considered it an impertinence on Hero's part to know, or pretend to know, anything about her son of which she, his mother, was not aware. She would talk of her own grievances, the peculations of her servants, the dishonesty of her tradespeople, the expense of her establishment, the indecent demands made upon her purse by the clergy, the untruthfulness of her gas meter, the exorbitant poor's rates, the iniquity of turnpikes, the abomination of Christmas-boxes, the encroachments of work-people, the inebriety of her laundress, and a hundred other topics of the kind ; but let Hero try to change the conversation to some anecdote, or allusion to less personal matters, the formula, 'Oh, I know all about that,' cut short her interpolations.

She suspected Hero of corresponding with her son, and watched her narrowly, laying conversational pitfalls to betray the confession. But Hero scrupulously avoided saying a word that might compromise Fitz. If he had not told his mother that they corresponded, he had certainly some good reason for his reticence. In spite of herself, Mrs. Fitzgerald's hard and bitter method of existence was modified by Hero's visits. Something certainly ailed the elder woman, though she suffered no inquiries to be made, and concealed her sufferings. The most affectionate solicitude would have met with the rudest and roughest of rebuffs. 'I wish people would leave me to live in peace, and to die in peace. They won't get rid of me any the sooner for making a fuss.' So Hero had to submit to being told that the coachman complained his horses were worked to death, that she cost Mrs. Fitzgerald a stable-boy, that she wore out the tires and axles, and injured the springs of the carriage, all because her vanity led her to prefer driving in another person's carriage, at that other person's expense, to the far healthier alternative of walking at her own. There was, to her, something intensely pathetic in the sight of the ailing woman getting no

pleasure, no profit, no refreshment, out of her wealth. But if these might be purchased at the cost of her own personal annoyance, Hero was ready to make the trifling sacrifice with cheerfulness. Many an afternoon she sat beside the bitter-tongued, solitary old woman, her heart overflowing with a pitiful patience she dared not show, and of which silence was the only outward expression. She was doing her best, little as it was, for Fitz, in bearing gently with the one human being whose condition seemed to ask any service at her hands.

Life, to Hero, had become phantasmagoric. She saw 'men as trees walking.' She worked to no definite point ; she awaited no special issue. People married, and had children born to them, and died ; time rolled on, the seasons changed, but a sameness that nothing could alter had settled down upon her monotonous existence. Even her beloved piano lost its former charm, and spoke no longer the thoughts it had been wont to utter. Still young, according to the Psalmist's standard of existence, she lived the life of an old woman : grey, negative, void, null. A strange mood of settled acceptance settled down upon her. There was no rebellion, scarcely regret. She

simply went forward on a self-ordained daily routine, punctual, accurate, like a well-made machine ; mechanical, unswerving. These were her daylight hours. But, when her modest maidens had extinguished the last light, and the little household was dismissed for the night, in face of the hours of wakefulness yet to be confronted Hero's fortitude sometimes forsook her. Then, with passionate sobs and tears, she would call upon her dear, dead mother ; then she would realise the blessed shade of love wherewith she had formerly been overshadowed, the gracious fruits, the fragrant flowers, the rest and refreshment awaiting her after the labour and heat of the day, but now, alas ! for ever lost. With what agonised yearning and hopeless regret she lamented the past, with what passionate pleadings she stretched out her longing arms across the gulf of separation, across the yawning emptiness and darkness of the night !

Rebellion had ceased ; the Irrevocable cannot be argued ; and, as the word, ever recurring with clock-like precision, struck a knell upon her heart, she mechanically re-echoed its merciless monotone as she murmured the refrain, ' Alone ! Alone ! '

CHAPTER XXXII.

BIDING HER TIME.

THE heroes of the World, the men who have changed the whole frame and state of things, who have affected times and peoples, and, in their own persons, have caused revolutions, rendering null and void all that has gone before, may be counted upon the fingers of one's right hand.

Great captains, men of war, leaders of armies, and gainers or losers of battles, whether of the ancient or modern world, can claim no such distinction. Of the very greatest victory, after a lapse of years, but little remains, and that little is local. - Oftentimes the triumph proves, in the long run, to have been but temporary, the disaster permanent, the cost out of all proportion to the result, the thing clearly better left alone than accomplished. In effect, all wars are but follies of the first

magnitude. The clash of arms, the glitter of accoutrements, the clangour of trumpets, the floating plumes, the tramp of armed men, the pricking of horsemen on the plain, the waving of banners, the shouts and hurrahs, the cheers and enthusiasm, only cover the ghastly pageant of Death, made more horrible to all thoughtful men by the contrast with all this empty glare and senseless glitter. It is 'the red-coat bully in his boots, that hides the march of men from us ;' and the world is growing daily more and more to 'hate him and his trade,' despite the periodical intoxication which his plumes and spurs seem still able to produce.

These truisms, from which men turn impatiently, cannot be too often insisted on. Certain convictions are day by day, ignore them as we will, silently gathering strength. And, though thinking minds may acknowledge that there is no present hope of seeing standing armies abolished, nor war declared to be, as it is, an anachronism, yet civilisation, the advancement of learning, the spread of education, the growth of liberal ideas, are slowly and silently, steadily and surely, tending in that direction and to that end. The dreamers and diletantists who are now passed by, with a smile of indul-

gent pity, or acknowledged from the seat of the scornful with a silent sneer as impracticable, futile, and of no account, will some day be recognised as the pioneers of that later, and more beneficent, dispensation, when we shall have ceased to regard 'men with muskets,' and 'caps of hair,' as the only tangible relics of heroism, left to an unheroic age. If we dispense with heroes, in the narrow, professional, and military sense of the word, we shall find but few who truly merit to be so called, or can justly claim a place in the first rank, as influencing not only their own time and people, but humanity at large in all ages.

First, and with all due reverence let it be spoken, men must acknowledge Him who, born a poor Jewish carpenter, the associate of humble fishermen, without so much as where to lay His head, preached the new doctrine of mercy, of peace and good-will ; of gentleness and brotherhood, in place of the old hard Mosaic law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or the Pagan doctrine of just reprisals. Beside the warmth and sweet humanity of this teaching all the wisdom of all the ancients sounds hard, and cold, and lifeless. That gentle

message, proclaimed on the shores of Galilee to the waiting nations, and expiated on Calvary (the humble heroic life closed by the humiliating heroic death) was destined to conquer conquerors, to crush kings, to lighten the darkness of the Pagan world, and to ameliorate the sufferings of humanity for ever.

Mahomet, too, was a hero, with a message that brought life and nationality to the people he addressed, and taught them truths which must endure, because they are essential and eternal. No Christian martyr ever stood more sublimely by his faith than the Moslem by his; from Delhi to Granada a devout belief in God inspires the dusky millions who recognise a Theocracy which many have dreamed, but which it was given to Mahomet alone to establish. The Mussulman of to-day is as fervent in faith as were the primitive Christians, the pious Puritans, the Pilgrim Fathers. He goes into battle with the old war-cry on his lips, ‘Allah il Allah!’ and, as Mr. Carlyle says, ‘This night at Cairo, the watchman, when he cries “Who goes?” will hear, along with the reply of the wayfarer, “There is no god but God.”’

He too—who out of an obscure, persecuted, nomadic people, made a nation—was poor,

humble, and of no consideration. His life—like that other and greater Life—passed in the roughest frugality, open to all men in its poverty and labour. Not invested with any of the prestige of privacy, not pretending to mystery, not flattered by powerful adherents nor followed by the frivolous for the sake of notoriety; and yet when the day and the hour came, speaking freely to the astonished Persian king, Chosroes, and to the perplexed Greek Emperor Heraclius, in cloak of his own patching, and ‘shoes of his own clouting,’ a fearless, God-imbued man, with a message for the waiting millions.

Such, too, was Luther, the obscure monk hidden away in the cloistered cell of a silent monastery. The time was ripe, the bolt fell, and at his feet the corpse of his friend Alexis, struck to death by the electric flash, revealed to him in one moment the Nothingness of things. God, Truth, Eternity spoke to him from those blackened ashes, from that shrivelled simulacrum, a second since a man made in his Maker’s image, his friend, Alexis. The poor old mining labourer his father, the patient humble housewife his mother, could not dream that their boy, glad to sing carols for charity from door to

door, to beg his commons of well-to-do neighbours, to turn his hand to any chance job that offered, was destined to break the power of Rome, to humble the pride of the Papal see, to make princes, potentates, and powers tremble on their thrones. Not for Germany alone had the iconoclastic Erfurt monk a message. The Augustine friar became the high-priest of a protesting Christendom, ripe for rebellion against the scandal of Papal venality. Leo the Tenth, a sort of elegant sixteenth-century Gallio, was as tolerant in his answers—when the fussy churchmen by whom he was surrounded came buzzing about his ears with the tale of Luther's delinquencies—as was Pilate to the clamorous Jews. But after a time the Pagan-popedom took alarm, and that crisis ensued which showed the world that Truth, the eternal, could defy temporalities, and take up the gauntlet of the Papal bull—flung in defiance in Luther's face—whereof the crackling parchment, burning before the gates of Wittenberg, went up with a merry sound, threatening to set all Europe ablaze!

Out of that bonfire arose many things not destined altogether to die out in smoke. The English Puritanism that planted new colonies ;

English Oliver and his Ironsides ; English freedom, with its Parliaments and right of protestation ; the Americas, the Edict of Nantes, the French Revolution, and the germ of more things than can be here enumerated, whose genesis we, at this present, unless we are wilfully blind, must both witness and acknowledge.

Gutenberg, Fust, and Schœffer (whether we regard them as three, or take the trio as a whole, each necessary to the completion of the other), and our own English Caxton, may certainly claim to be of the select company of men with a message to the World at large, not to their own, or kindred nations only. The prophets of religion, perforce, proselytised as they went, calling on men to hear the truths they proclaimed. But with the new birth of modern learning, men from afar exhorted their prophets to speech, and cried to their teachers for more ; and the books, as they fell from the press of the Westminster ‘ Almonry ’ were caught up by eager hands, snatching greedily at every fresh tome as a boon and a blessing. The incalculable, unending, ever-growing results of type-printing, who shall foretell them ? who predict their ultimate effects ? who prophecy

their final triumphs and perfections? Are not the most brilliant victories that were ever won (even from the general's point of view), mere nothings in comparison with the conquests of learning and letters? And is not the local heroism of the soldier (good in its way, as the expression of loyalty, obedience, and truth), but a small and poor thing, limited in effect, and unfruitful in result; as compared with the glorious acquisitions secured to us by the peaceful arts, by the work of these Teachers of men?

It is in the nature of things that the limitation which time and place set upon men and their works should circumscribe the circle of Heroes, in the sense here aimed at, as men with messages to Humanity. So much necessarily remains local; so much is necessarily adapted only to the man's own country and clime. Shakspeare, in this sense, is no Hero. Nor is Dante; for Shakspeare would mean nothing to the Turk, nor Dante to the Cossack. The Warwickshire peasant had his message, and, spoke it, though no man was ever less of a conscious preacher than he. So had Dante, the melancholy apologist of Mediæval religion; so had Homer, the 'blind old man of Scio's rocky isle.' But though Greece is dead, and Homer

yet speaks to us ; though Dante has rejoined the shade of Virgil, and his written words still alternately glow and whirl in fiery circles, or appal by their depths of gloom and profound despair ; though Stratford sees many pilgrims, and Shakspeare is jealously claimed by every man and woman of Saxon speech, yet we cannot pretend that even to these men it was given to change the face of Humanity as did the message of the carpenter's Son ; as did the Prophet's worship ; as did the obscure Augustine monk's protest when he burnt the papal parchment ; as did Caxton's printing-press, or the Mainz men's chap-books, without the shedding of a drop of blood ! And thus it happens that, if we run through a string of names recalling the great ones of the earth, those who may claim to have changed the pre-existing order of things becomes infinitesimally small. Talent, and even Genius, we are forced to confess, have for the most part but a local influence and limited power, and dwarfed and diminished by the towering forms which Imagination exorcises, they pass in pigmy procession across the Ages.

In these latter days when, as the nations have sunk into an apathy of luxury—classed by

a misnomer as 'civilisation'—enthusiasm seems to have died out, a new sort of unrecognised, not to be defined religion has sprung up, affording an outlet for the more ardent spirits still capable of aspiration.

In the 'enthusiasm of Humanity,' all sorts and conditions of men, who find it impossible to pledge themselves to the faith of special dogma, to subscribe defined doctrine, to swear to any hard and fast articles of orthodoxy, recognise and welcome the common scope offered to the spirit burning within them, in the grand ideal of the universal Brotherhood of Mankind. In no former Age, was humanity ever so much, or so universally busied, with the concerns of humanity; never were so many hospitals, orphanages, refuges, asylums, built and dedicated to the service of the poor; never were such vast sums collected or dispensed, independently of race, faith, or centre, for sufferers from plague, pestilence, and famine. Some give of their activity, some of their sloth, some to be praised of men, some because everyone else does the same, some as an expiation, some as an offering, some as a sacrifice, some of their poverty, some of their abundance, so many

men so many minds, only that all are agreed on the obligation of Gifts.

Christian Socialism, drawn from New Testament maxims, is twisted into the wildest of theories; the precepts with which every page of the Gospels is thickly strewn are in the mouth of the extremest levellers and propagandists; and every fanatical regicide believes himself to be the possible Deliverer of the oppressed, the potential Saviour of the expectant Peoples.

A stone laid upon a piece of steel, may cause an Empire to crumble to ruin; a morsel of dynamite, demolish a dynasty; a pistol-shot proclaim a republic.

What wonder if the annals of Nihilism are charged with a romantic charm for its votaries, replete as their pages are with stories of stern resolve, unflinching devotion, and a high courage which nothing can intimidate, and a secrecy of which no torment can break the inflexible silence? To each member of the secret Society the thought is possible, 'I may change the destinies of my nation; I may win the benediction of my contemporaries; I may confer happiness on multitudes, and as a figure in history, for all time, tower high above the "state of kings;" a giant of Truth whose

shadow, projected far into the future, hides in befitting obscurity the pigmy Cæsars at its base.'

The Countess Perowsky, after her adventure with Esther Rodostamos, pursued her usual course of life, and received her friends with unvarying courtesy, though she was fully aware of great and anxious undertakings being swiftly and secretly organised, in which she might be called upon to take an active, prominent, and responsible part. The strange compound of fanaticism and revenge working within her never permitted her to falter or hesitate in the execution of her project. When the time came—as come it must—for action, she told herself that if weighed in the exacting balance that would test her faith she must not be found wanting. Sweet, soft, and altogether enchanting as by universal consent she was allowed to be, an implacable purpose fired her outraged soul to signal vengeance. The thought of that treble treachery, the treachery of a lover and a sister with a sister, the treachery of broken vows, of vows broken in absence, nerved her spirit to unflinching resolve, and condemned all possible hesitation, even in thought, as a base and contemptible weakness.

That popular frenzy whose inception dates, in its later development, from Germany, fostered by the supersitious, illiterate, and low-born secular clergy of Russia, and whose outrages will seem to later historians an incredible anachronism—the *Judenhetze*—had not as yet made itself felt in Russia, otherwise than by such isolated instances as that of poor Chelanska's misadventure; and yet Helena's heart misgave her.

Popular tumults were the last sort of demonstration that 'the Society' desired; nothing must attract the attention of the authorities in that direction. The people must, at all costs, for the present be kept quiet; soothed into submission, or threatened into silence. She would certainly warn Esther to be careful and to bid Chelanska also take heed unto her ways; for, although there might be nominal justice for every citizen in St. Petersburg, yet she knew that in Russia the Jew was still accursed, forbidden to live or trade in the cities unless 'protected,' treated like an unclean beast, driven back to the filthy Ghetto which is his lair, tolerated only on sufferance, and liable to a thousand petty insults and injuries, against which no appeal would serve him with his

oppressors, since they were all offered in the easy name of religion.

On the other hand, her affiliation to that Society—which was pleading at the cost of life itself, for Reform as against the tyranny of Custom—had opened her eyes to the fact that it included, in all its ranks, a vast number of Jewish members, and not a few Jewish women. Born with an immemorial inheritance of hatred in their hearts, endowed with a birthright of misery and shame, hounded to earth by the persecutions of petty officials and by the ignorance of a superstitious populace (the tools of a priesthood scarcely less ignorant), it was to be foreseen that the fund of prejudice and hate, gathering and accumulating secretly, would, sooner or later, find expression in some exemplary act of resentment on the part of the persecuted. Amongst the more educated of the Jewish women, a spirit of cold, yet implacable, vengeance might, by those who cared to note the signs of the times, be observed; and so often as, in the exercise of her religious duties, the Countess Perowsky was called upon to listen to, or read, the histories of those Biblical heroines to whom no deed of vengeance seems to have come amiss, she was forced to

recognise that the type was not extinct, but, on the contrary, capable of terrible reprisals when the day of reckoning should dawn, and centuries of contumely and degradation be expiated by the careless and comparatively innocent legatees of brutal ignorance, vain superstition, and misused power.

In every *émeute*, in every list of political prisoners, in every class of female students, a number of Jewish names might be recognised; and many names, adopted for convenience by Hebrew men and women, concealed the extent of the contingent supplied by members of the Jewish nationality or, more correctly, race.

They—at any rate the poorer amongst them—had everything to gain, and nothing to lose, by a general upheaval. In the present state of things, where everything was still a matter of ‘privilege’ or ‘concession’ to the Jewish individual, there could be no hope of any liberal construction being placed on laws hampering their community; and although any outspoken apprehension to the effect that the inexhaustible stock of patience and submission which (to the unprejudiced and gentle-hearted) is so pathetic a characteristic of this remarkable race, might come to an end, was safe to be met with a

shrug of contempt, as who should say ‘These slaves have not the spirit of curs,’ yet they who had looked behind the scenes, and were open to conviction, were forced to recognise a danger which their opponents would not allow.

Chelanska obeyed her mistress, and lodged no complaint with the authorities as to her maltreatment. She kept away from the synagogue, and, as she never referred to the outrage, it might have been believed the harsh treatment she had undeservedly received, was forgotten. She was faithful, humble, and secret. But none the less she was only biding her time.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MASKED BALL.

MASKED balls have always been popular where Court intrigue gives a large margin for heart-burnings and jealousies, injuries to be avenged, spites to be gratified, ambitions to be furthered, love-affairs to be disguised. But of late years, in St. Petersburg, what virtually amounted to a prohibition had been laid upon this class of entertainment. It was said, in Society, that the danger of the *Ispravnik* circulating, either ostensibly or secretly, on festive occasions, was greatly augmented where the mask and domino afforded a safe and plausible disguise for these much-dreaded agents of an uneasy Government.

Since, at a *bal masqué*, perfect liberty, not to say license, of speech is accorded to all, and no one may resent being accosted, or refuse an

answer to any question within the ordinary bounds of conversation, the danger of intrusion by political spies was felt to be greater than elsewhere. One remedy, indeed, existed, and had been adopted at Court. At the grand masked ball given on S. Sylvester's Eve, or rather (for the Russian kalendar shifts our festivals) on New Year's Eve, O. S., every guest in the Winter Palace was expected, as the last stroke of twelve chimed from the clocks of the capital, to remove his or her mask, and in a general 'tumult of acclaim' to welcome aloud the entrance of the New Year, but a moment since yet upon the threshold, but now a real Presence, for good or for evil, amongst the myriad throng of guests.

Yet, since to unmask at command and, *nolens volens*, reveal one's identity at a given moment, is evidently to neutralise the chief, if not the only, charm of the masked ball, it was not surprising that the alternative found no popularity. How threaten, intimidate, cajole, flatter, abuse, scarify, lampoon, mock or jest at one's ease if the indiscretion be forthwith revealed? Such a consummation, necessarily, silences the tongue, deadens the wit, lames the sarcasm, and places restrictions on the malice of the maskers, since

they know beforehand that, at the stroke of midnight, the mask falls and the disguise is at an end. Why assume either the one or the other?

The comparatively innocent excitement of *intrigué*-ing one's friends by costumes, kept strictly secret, falls flat in comparison with the pasquinades which, under other circumstances, might fearlessly be circulated amongst the crowd; and if, on the one hand, the *Ispravnik* had found that the masked ball afforded dangerous immunities to those most to be dreaded, Society, on the other, had ceased to care for an amusement which either included too many dangers, or lost its chiefest charm by a concession to the uncongenial circumstances.

The New Year's masked ball at Court had been declared a very tame affair, and people openly and angrily affirmed that the *raison d'être* of a *bal masqué* was at an end, since, after an hour or two, all disguise was, at command, to be thrown off, and the responsibility of words, spoken in jest or otherwise, thrown upon the speaker. Nevertheless, so great had been the gloom of the season hitherto, that St. Petersburg society enthusiastically welcomed the report that the Countess Helena Perowska was

about to send out invitations for a masked ball on a grand scale.

‘Remember,’ Mellin said to her, ‘we must have got everything over before midnight, lest the unmasking be demanded. Then it will be of no consequence. By these means we can hold a conference of much larger magnitude than would be prudent or practicable elsewhere. Out of your four or five hundred guests it would be impossible for any spy to observe the temporary absence of some thirty or forty during part of the evening. The crowd circulating through the different saloons would make it a matter of impossibility for any amount of police agents to number them or miss them, and after midnight, even if there be some suspicious physiognomies in the crowd, no one could say that they had not been in the rooms all night. Given the mask and domino, and not even the presence of the Emperor himself could be suspected.’

‘Ah! therein lies the very danger that weighs upon me. If any enemy should introduce himself to our secret conference unawares?’

‘How is that possible? The secret room is only approachable through your bedroom on the one hand, through Count Perowsky’s study

on the other. Your faithful Ivan has the sign and countersign : to your own two personal maids you have given strict orders not to leave the ladies' temporary dressing-room on the opposite side of the building. Chelanska, whose attachment to her mistress is proverbial, and on whom we can rely implicitly, will be in your boudoir with her mistress's pelisse, on the pretext that if her lady, not being well, should call for her to go home, she will not have the trouble of seeking in the general cloak-room for her wraps. No one can reach your bedroom without passing through the boudoir. Chelanska has the sign and countersign. Addressed to the uninitiated, it means nothing ; but answered correctly, as it can only be by the initiated, it gives the *entrée* to our conference. Believe me, nothing can be safer.'

Bianca, to whom, as was natural, a masked ball was a novelty of the most exciting order, and whose becoming costume, provided by the Countess's liberality, might have made even a girl otherwise innocent of vanity, count the hours until the signal for unmasking should allow her to score her honours, was far less preoccupied with the possible success of her toilette than with a project, wildly imagined

and ardently nursed by her since the ball had been first discussed. In French or Italian she would have an opportunity of speaking, undiscovered, to Mellin. Her voice she could disguise, for her rare musical talents gave her facilities in this matter unsuspected by her friends, and undreamed of by Mellin. Even German she might attempt; for out of the four or five hundred guests assembled there would certainly be some whose accent might be as imperfect as her own. Her slender figure, being disguised by a voluminous domino, she could add three or four inches to her height without anyone suspecting what she owed to her *chaussure*, and thus her very stature would be misleading.

But how to recognise Mellin? He, too, would wear a domino; and, silent by habit, he would, on an occasion like the present, be scarcely likely to indulge, of choice, in voluntary loquacity.

She was made aware, and that as a matter of right, with the secret meeting to be held by the Brotherhood, and her heart beat high at the thought of participating in what was acknowledged by all concerned, to be a most momentous *séance* at a most critical juncture.

Delegates who could not have ventured to brave the *Stanovie* by entering Count Michael Perowsky's hotel in their ordinary costume in broad daylight could, in mask and domino, safely run the risk. Men whose countenances were circulating by means of photography in all the capitals of Europe, and who were as well known to the Russian police as the members of his own family to each individual spy, could fearlessly confront the most practised *mouchard*, safe to elude the vigilance of the secret force. Disguise, generally felt to be, in itself, a dangerous and compromising expedient, is unwillingly resorted to by the graver and more cautious members of secret societies. But a disguise, openly assumed, and frankly claiming to be a disguise, loses half its ridicule and all its risk under authorised conditions.

‘What costumes are you and Mlle. Martello going to wear?’ Count Perowsky asked of his wife, as they sat sipping tea in the late afternoon preceding the ball.

‘You must not ask indiscreet questions.’

‘Surely, Helena Paulovna, a man may know his wife's dress?’

‘There is no “surely,” Michael Nicolaievitch, when it is a question of *à bal costumé*.

And, besides, Mlle. Martello would not thank me for betraying her secrets.'

Bianca, who was present, looked up suddenly, as though about to say something; but, upon second thoughts, she remained silent.

Count Michael glanced at his wife, and a cloud came over his face. He was remarked to be oftener at her tea-table than formerly; indeed, St. Petersburg society had begun to jest and gossip upon his attentions to his lawful spouse, as entertaining and at the same time rather hopeless. The Perowskys were spoken of as a model couple; it was said that their romance was yet to begin, and the situation was novel and exciting.

'For my part I shall be heartily glad when all is well over,' said the Countess, with meaning, as she rose and moved towards the door.

'And yet you are not wont to be nervous. Your courage surely does not fail?'

'My courage? No, Michael Nicolaievitch. But this is no ordinary occasion. Personally, I live prepared; but it would add a bitterness to death to know I had left the mission of my life unfulfilled. Not that I am thinking of myself. I think of others. I should not like disaster to befall any guests to whom our roof

is supposed to offer the guarantee and shelter of honest hospitality.'

'A man can only give what he has,' replied her husband; 'no responsibility in this instance, or in the sense you mean, Helena Paulovna, attaches to my reception of certain persons. But this lugubrious tone is not very appropriate to a festive occasion. Mlle. Martello will gather anything but cheerful ideas of our social institutions;' and again he looked at Bianca.

If she observed it she made no sign, and in a minute or two she quitted the room.

Left alone with her husband, Helena Perowska glanced at him for a moment in silence, and, returning to her place, sat down again as though to say something special. All unconscious of her gaze, he continued in self-absorbed silence whilst the cloud grew and gathered upon his brow.

'*Mon ami!*' she said at length, in her most conciliatory tones.

He started like a person caught unawares, but beyond a change of attitude and expression, sufficiently indicative of attention, made no reply.

'My friend, do not mistake me; forgive me

if I *am* mistaken, but it seems to me that you are drifting unawares into a blunder.'

'What blunder?'

'That young girl who has just left the room is a child; she is a stranger in a strange land; she is my guest, in a sense my child—*our* guest, *our* child, Michael Nicolaievitch.'

'Well?'

'Well, hospitality, duty, womanly feeling demand that I should protect her.'

'It seems to me that she is very well able to protect herself.'

'Ah, have you tried?'

'I thought you were only suspecting me of a blunder; it seems Helena Paulovna, that you were accusing me of a crime.'

'Ah! now I am relieved. That is nobly spoken though disguised in jest, Michael Nicolaievitch. It is you that have said it.'

'But,' her husband went on, 'if it were so, you would be the last person who had a right to complain.'

'For myself, you mean? You are right. But it was not of myself I was thinking. If you are generous, you will not speak of me, and you have been too generous all along to be unjust now. What I meant was, that if, as

might well be, you are becoming unduly attached to this girl, our guest, our child, a stranger within our gates, you would be wasting honest emotion in a direction that forbids the thought of return ; and then I should pity you. If, on the contrary, any less honourable thoughts prompted you, why then you would be in danger of that crime of which you imagined, thank God falsely, a moment ago that I accused you.'

'And if so, Helena Paulovna, you would have yourself to thank for it.'

He answered her brutally, rising suddenly from his seat, his face flushing a sullen dusky red.

'No, no, Michael Nicolaievitch, not that. I have enough to answer for, and I am ready to accept the accusation, and to expiate my fault ; but the worst wife in the world need not make a man guilty of an unmanly act, an ungentlemanlike, cowardly, cruel attack upon a defenceless girl ; that girl his wife's guest.'

'It need be nothing of the kind.'

'Your answers show me that you are not in earnest. When I spoke it was for your sake, not for hers. She is a girl full of character, proud, highminded, ignorant of evil, innocent as a child. If you were so fortunate as to be free, she is a girl whom you might

think of making your wife. That not being so, there *can* be no alternative. But let us drop this disagreeable theme.'

She disdained to think of herself in the matter ; it was only on Bianca's account that she was interested. She began now to doubt the wisdom of having spoken at all.

The ball-room was crowded, the dancing animated, and the buzz of conversation between the pauses of the band showed that there was no dearth of spirit in the dancers. At the upper end of the room, on a sort of *daïs*, the Countess had seated several of the elderly ladies, *douairières* who, not caring much to preserve the secret of their disguise, chatted easily with a few corresponding beaux of their own age, impatiently waiting the hour to strike when they might get rid of their masks and apply themselves to cards.

Bianca, leaning against one of a group of large orange trees, began to realise with despair the difficulty of carrying out her project. Two masks seated on a low divan on the other side of the orange-tubs attracted her attention. In the lady she had recognised, by a ring which Esther never laid aside, her special antipathy. The costly lace with which

the heiress's dress was covered had caught in an iron hoop encircling the orange tub, and only deft and delicate ungloved fingers could extricate it from danger.

Whilst her companion held the glove which Esther had drawn off, Bianca watched anxiously.

Here was a chance for a lover! He might pretend to have dropped the glove, and secrete it rapidly, whilst the lady was still busy with her dress. As a matter of fact the cavalier held it patiently and openly.

‘Shall we sit here?’ he asked, when she had disengaged her dress; ‘it is cool and we can talk at our ease.’

‘Yes, and I can put on my glove.’ He held it towards her as he spoke, and by the small white scar just above his wrist Bianca recognised Mellin. Her face flushed beneath her mask, perhaps with jealousy.

‘We must not remain together,’ he said, ‘it might attract attention, the thing of all others we wish to avoid.’ (We!) ‘And, thank Heaven, you are of those my attachment does not compromise. I can come to you at any time, can stay as long as you will let me, and say at my leisure all I have at heart to say.’

A ball-room ought only to be a place of rendezvous for strangers; convenient in its own way for mere acquaintances, but not good enough for those whose needs are less narrow.' Some few words were lost. The speaker lowered his tone.

Then Esther's voice, clear, round, and ringing, and utterly free from disguise, answered gaily: 'You command, I obey. I submit to your better judgment. I forego my own opinion, and sacrifice my own plan to you, because I feel you are right. But I am right too. Time presses, and there are others to be considered, otherwise I would not resign,' the dancers came between them, and the listening girl supplied the words from her own beating heart; 'a moment of your society,' Esther had been about to say.

What a flirt she was, how hungry after admiration, how greedy of flattery and attention! She had a dozen men at her feet, and yet, because he was cold and silent and held back, she must conquer Mellin too! He must swell her triumph, though but at the wheels of her chariot! Their very openness exasperated Bianca; they were so secure, they were so independent that they disdained to disguise so

much as their voices. They had probably agreed to meet; he knew her costume, she had a clue to his identity, and they could spend the whole evening together, unsuspected; beneath the friendly disguise of the mask and domino they were safe alike from friend and foe.

But she was mistaken. A mask who had been hovering within earshot came up and engaged Esther in a sparring conflict of badinage and repartee. Her light laughter had all the ring of triumph in it, Bianca said to herself, and she was glad to follow Mellin, if only to escape from the jarring sound of Esther's mirthful ease and contentment.

Mellin threw himself upon a divan at the lower end of the room. He was evidently waiting. A voice spoke to him over his shoulder.

'Do not look round, Sir Mask. The music covers all sound of our voices. We can converse without the appearance of exchanging a syllable.'

'I am all attention.'

'You are betrayed.'

'How, and by whom?'

'By a woman.'

‘ Naturally : her name ? ’

‘ Everyone knows it. Think of the domino you last spoke with.’

‘ All persons are alike in this disguise.’

‘ Perhaps. But you know the lady I mean. I come, as a messenger from one who bids me say that when the person in question disappoints or plays you false, when there is any delicate or dangerous service that needs loyal devotion, a matter in which you cannot appear, and your agent must remain unknown, then she is ready unquestioningly to undertake it, even at the cost of life, without the reward of thanks or recognition.’

‘ Her name ? ’

‘ I may not reveal.’

‘ But if I need her services ? If this large offer be no hoax ? ’

There was a pause, for, to give a reference to the Countess, or to Julie Kerezoff, would have been to betray herself. Then Bianca said in German, ‘ Advertise in the *Ruski Mir* in French or German for Hypatia, and give an address where you can be found, or where an answer can be addressed.’

‘ Good. Is she here to-night ? ’

‘ The person is—one of us.’

‘Good again. But you do not answer me. Is she here?’

‘I am desired to ask you a question.’

‘Ask it.’

‘Do you know any English in St. Petersburg?’

‘No. That is, I have a bowing acquaintance with the two Englishmen nicknamed in Society Damon and Pythias.’

‘No one else?’

‘No one.’

‘No one—absolutely? I was desired to ask you this.’

‘Stay, I slightly know another—a lady.’

‘Is she trustworthy?’

‘I cannot tell.’

‘Have you no means of ascertaining?’

‘None; and since I do not intend to trust her—anyone rather—if I may judge of probabilities——’

‘Are you prejudiced?’

‘No; utterly impartial, if indifference be a pledge of impartiality.’

‘England is a generous country; a convenient asylum. Have you no friends there, to whom, in case of need, you could go?’

‘No English friends. Perhaps some of other nationalities.’

Bianca half hoped, half expected, that out of his enigmatical replies some chance allusion to her mother or herself would show that he had thought of them as likely to receive and conceal him, should the necessity arise. He evidently had forgotten so much as their existence. He was absorbed in the pursuit of other ideas.

‘You will not forget. I will tell the person whose messenger I am that you will remember—Hypatia.’

And she left him, her heart swelling with indignant pain.

At a quarter before twelve o’clock Count Michael Perowsky reminded his friends in council assembled that he and certain members of the Society must return to the ball-room. At midnight the signal to unmask would be given, and no one must be missing whose absence might cause suspicion.

One by one the Brotherhood, guided by Ivan, had been ushered into the secret chamber. One by one the ladies who had the password were introduced by Chelanska, who, when the list was full, and the accurate number

pricked off, herself entered the apartment and double-locked the door behind her mistress, who passed in just before her.

The door of the boudoir was already locked. Valuables belonging to the Countess made this a plausible, and even necessary, precaution, with the house full of strangers, and an army of servants and hangers-on, congregated in ante-rooms and passages, waiting ostensibly for their masters and mistresses.

Into a lady's private apartment no one can venture to penetrate quite unceremoniously. The door which Chelanska locked behind her was labelled 'Wardrobe,' and was supposed to be devoted to the Countess's sables, lace, brocades, Court costumes, and jewellery.

No one unmasked.

It was customary, as has already been said, at these meetings to retain the mask and long black cloak; the present occasion made no exception to the rule.

Bakounine had given in his programme such prominence to women, and the devotion, unselfishness, and tried integrity of the sisterhood had been proved to demonstration so often, that it was felt, if they chose to speak, their utterances should command respect-

ful attention. But they were reminded on this occasion that time was short, and the brief moments necessarily precious. That which would not admit of delay they were requested to convey in the fewest possible words at their command. Thus, to the bitter disappointment of Chelanska, Esther Rodostamos could only advert in a few concise words to the outrage of which her nurse had been the victim in the *faubourg*.

The Countess said a few words of impassioned remonstrance with regard to certain crying abuses long promised amelioration, and the total disregard and neglect on the part of the authorities. Certain statements were made, reports read, money voted to certain objects, but there was a feeling that these were merely the preliminaries, and that the *raison d'être* of the masked ball was something more, and other, than the mere routine of a large organisation. But when Count Perowsky rose just before midnight, and reminded his guests that no accustomed face must be missing from amongst the maskers when the clock struck twelve, a sign, imperceptible save to the initiated, went round, and as the maskers passed out one by one the doors finally closed on ten masked men who had not as yet spoken, and who were by

common consent left sitting round the table in the centre of the windowless apartment ; a mere dark passage or vestibule, secured by fire-proof doors, between the Countess's bedroom and her husband's study. It would not be difficult for those whom it concerned, to rejoin these mysterious visitors when the guests in the saloon beyond, relieved of their masks, should begin to enjoy the pleasures of gratified vanity, the sight of feminine loveliness, and dispensation from the boredom of an affected address, which the *dénoûment* tended to render as spiritless as it was tiresome.

There had been one or two strange rumours afloat during the earlier part of the evening, and, as on pretence of looking at an old piece of enamelled silver work, Mellin followed the Countess to her boudoir, he said a word to her that sent the indignant blood in vivid waves to the very roots of her hair.

‘Impossible !’ she cried.

‘But true. I know it as a fact. X—— gave me every detail and every proof. It was rumoured that there was danger ; some conspiracy on foot. He was ever foolhardy.’

‘There is something more than foolhardiness in such an act !’

‘Yes,’ Mellin answered, purposely misunderstanding her. ‘Something of Quixotism ; something of the whimsical curiosity of a Haroun Al Raschid, which He affected in earlier years, if report does not err.’

She was silent, not choosing to say. ‘Something indelicate ; something of an insult ; something of an outrage ; something wanting in self-respect ; something cruel to me as a woman ; something cowardly.’ But she only asked :—

‘Was He alone?’

‘No. When She found that a fancy which originated in a jest of hers, had become a resolution, and that he persisted in coming, She insisted on accompanying him.’

‘She?—She?—here?’ It was just what Helena herself, under conceivable circumstances, might have done. Only—not to a sister—never to a sister—under *such* circumstances.

All the wounded woman in her, all the bitter sense of outraged delicacy, made the act an unforgettable, unforgiveable affront. Excess of anger kept her silent.

Then hurriedly, almost breathlessly : ‘When did they leave?’ she asked.

‘As the last stroke of twelve lifted every

mask they disappeared behind the *portière* of the blue saloon.'

The Countess had instinctively sought the disguise of her mask. Her wounded spirit felt sorely the need of privacy, yet dignity and self-respect demanded that she should show a brave front; she must not betray herself, even to Mellin.

'Will you kindly look for Mlle. Martello, and tell her that I want her,' she said in a cold voice.

And Mellin left her.

A few minutes later Bianca found the Countess, pale as a marble statue, but smiling and gracious as usual.

'If I am asked for, Martellina *mia*, say that I am indisposed, and have withdrawn for the night. Fräulein Fest will chaperon you. Good night. Dance and amuse yourself. You will only be young once, my dear;' and with unwonted tenderness she kissed the young girl's brow.

Bianca, whose hurried spirits had scarcely recovered from the mortification of Mellin's unconsciously contemptuous estimate of her worth, felt soothed and gratified by Helena Perowska's gentle affection. This woman, so

popular, beautiful, and distinguished, had by her gracious action, healed the cruel wound the young girl's *amour propre* had suffered. Mellin might despise her, Helena Perowska did not.

She leaned against the marble console and removed her mask. Her face was pale, her eyes brilliant; she saw her reflection in the glass: a girl no longer; a woman, with all that is proudest and most sensitive in her woman's nature, offended, outraged, spurned.

'He shall not despise me! He dare not despise me!' she murmured, passionately.

An arm was flung round her waist, and a cavalier, in a Vandyck costume, tearing the mask from his face, pressed his mouth on the girl's proud, pale lips, whose pure lines were trembling into tears.

But Bianca was strong, lithe, young, and fearless. She forced herself out of the rude embrace and stood confronting Michael Perowsky.

His mask lay on the ground between them.

His small, oblique eyes were glittering. There was an ugly expression in his face.

'How dare you?' Bianca asked, coldly and haughtily.

'Oh! that's how you take it? The regula-

tion thing, I believe, is to complain to the wife. Shall I call mine ?’

‘No. It is not worth while, with the *Stanovie* (town-police) available.’

‘Take care, young lady. You forget yourself.’

‘It is for you to take care, Michael Nicolaievitch ; it is you who forget yourself. For me, I despise you !’ and she went out, shutting the door in his astonished face.

At that later, and smaller, edition of the secret council to which she now returned, the Countess Helena Perowska sat unweariedly, unflinchingly, far on into the small hours of dawn. Grave and vast matters were deliberated, and portentous determinations declared irrevocably. It was a mere question of the How and the When of the final act of the tragic drama. There would be no future opportunity so favourable to discussion. The plan, in every detail, was elaborated, amended, matured, and accepted.

The late winter’s morning was at hand when the party finally broke up. There was nothing strange in a *moujik* or two returning with their empty hay-waggons through the still slumbering streets. Ivan undertook to see

that the *dvorniks*, or yard-men, were away betimes with all the straw and rubbish which mark the morrow of a great entertainment.

Count Michael, exasperated by his encounter with Bianca, bearded in his own den, felt that he had been doubly ignored, overlooked, possibly laughed at and made a butt of by his wife's sister and her companion, as he would be to-morrow, when the rumour got abroad, by half the town. The life of One of these two unbidden, unwelcome, and unexpected guests, whom no vigilance and no resistance could possibly have excluded, might possibly expiate the indiscretion of an intrusion which nothing could justify. He, Michael Perowsky, would not be the sport and fool a second time of the Man who had always treated him with the absolute, undisguised scorn wherewithal one treats a troublesome, insignificant, and yet importunate and offensive Thing.

The last word before the secret *séance* was broken up was spoken by the Countess.

‘I claim the execution of your project as my Right,’ she said, lifting her delicate white hand in solemn appeal to the masked assembly. And there was found no man to gainsay her.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

‘ A DREAMER OF DREAMS.’

IN the Winter Palace a saint lay dying.

The outside world fast bound in the iron grip of grim frost and Nature wrapped in one vast winding-sheet.

The snow, in noiseless feather-flakes, fell steadily and softly upon the white earth ; no one was abroad who could creep behind the merciful warmth of the stove or the shelter of four walls. A vast and universal silence made itself felt like a monition. Men went and came swiftly and silently, wrapped to the eyes in furs ; for even to speak was to endanger the lungs, and to stop and parley, fraught with a risk of frost-bite none the less real because invisible.

‘ Home ’ could surely never be so keenly and longingly realised as by the luckless wayfarer whom duty took abroad in this inclement

weather. How lucky the man whose whole world lay immediately around him, able without scruple of conscience to wait within until a more genial atmosphere and kinder skies should invite him abroad.

The sleighs passed noiselessly over the frozen snow ; the sleigh-bells ringing faint and clear, thin and far, ‘and thinner, clearer, farther going,’ as the chimes of that ocean city are said to ring in the ears of mariners sailing by chance across its spires and minarets, buried thousands of fathoms deep in the clear waters.

When storms arise or rough winds blow the silver sounds are lost ; but ships’ crews becalmed, or fishers rowing their heavily-laden boats to land over the still and shining waters, hear those ghostly chimes and carillons, and hastily cross themselves in pious recollection.

Impossible to imagine any risings or rebellions of the people in such weather as this. Poor humanity can scarcely keep its chilled and freezing blood in circulating order, much less drive the moral thermometer up to the point of enthusiasm. Material matters and the creature discomforts of the moment weigh heavier in the balance than the grandest flight of the most eloquent stump orator. There are times when

atmospherical influences reduce the moral condition to a dead level, and when a man's only thoughts take the form of a deep but melancholy desire, a hope that is almost akin to despair, that a speedy termination may be set to his open-air experiences.

There is an old proverb to the effect that in Russia one only sees the cold, whilst in Germany one feels it.

In the softly-carpeted passages and ante-rooms every foot-fall is deadened; the vast courtyards are silent as the tomb to which, with faint and faltering steps, the Imperial patient is descending. And yet, so protracted have been her sufferings, so long and so slow her agony, that those about her have come to disbelieve in the near probability of proximate dissolution.

In the ante-room two priests of the Greek Church are reading the Offices. One is the dying lady's confessor. During more years than he can now realise he has been the recipient of her secret griefs and fears, of her scruples and regrets, of her aspirations and repentances. All those secrets which, in flippant language, are easily and lightly said to lie 'between man and his Maker,' have only passed from earth to heaven through the

medium of the director of the Imperial conscience.

The task of intercessor, mediator, minister, has been an onerous one, and oftentimes the priest has wondered, despite his priestly vocation, at the persistent piety, the untiring scruples and repentances, the unflinching and energetic self-martyrdom that have marked the progress of a pious yet tormented soul.

It has not always been an easy task to fulfil the lofty requirements of an exacting faith, and there have been times of weariness and repulsion, when he has implored the Imperial devotee to take another director, and spare him the strain of witnessing so protracted and agonising a spiritual struggle. But the history of all those years, as the Imperial saint justly pleads, can never be told again; and without it no priest could adequately direct the penitent's conscience, or comfort her timid soul. Heavy as is, confessedly, the burthen laid upon his shoulders, he is yet called upon to bear it, with the plea that Azrael, the merciful, can now make no long tarrying, and that, with the release of the weary soul, the burthened ecclesiastic will find relief for his weary body.

On the opposite side of the room sits the

almoner of the Imperial charities, a man with the chiselled face of the young Augustus, clean-shaven, keen, and masterful of mien ; reserved, discreet, respectful. He dispenses the Imperial bounties, and is largely acquainted with all sorts and conditions of the poor, afflicted, and suffering populations. He bides his time ; sees much, learns more, hopes most. Near the door leading into the boudoir or small drawing-room stand two Sisters, ready, at a summons which may be expected every moment, to pass into the bedchamber and relieve the guard of two other sisters now keeping watch and ward. Nurses are there too ; but their functions are restricted to the barely necessary, accomplished as swiftly and as skilfully as possible, after which their duty is to retire beyond earshot until summoned again by one of the sisters in waiting. When the Imperial patient is well enough, these messengers of mercy are able to interest her by tales of the recipients of her bounty, by accounts of the orphanages or hospitals benefited, founded, or endowed by her who now lies low—as helpless as the poorest in that vast empire. Only this very morning, after the visit of the physicians, the Imperial invalid had given special orders with regard to

a children's hospital, and has inquired how far her almoner has carried out the instructions given him when she was last able to go through the list of her charities.

There is no night and no day in these purple chambers. The twilight of illness has its perpetual abode there and reigns supreme every hour of the twenty-four. Save the ticking of the clock, there is nothing to tell the advance of time, nothing to mark the flight of hours and days and weeks. 'Yesterday,' and 'to-morrow,' like the mathematical signs for certain quantities, are but symbolical terms, necessary in allusion to certain divisions of time and matters of routine.

It has been laid down as a law by the physicians in charge, that, unless directly asked, the attendants are never to mention dates. The day and hour which the Imperial patient believes it to be, that hour and day it is ; and should any member of the family or household be required at any time of day or night, that person must be fetched without reference to his or her convenience, engagements, or duties.

Thus—in a sense—time has already ceased to exist for the Imperial sufferer ; and it would be impossible for her to say how long she has

lain there in the faint hush of expectation preceding the final summons.

She is glad that the weary time of foreign journeyings and desperate remedies are at an end. That to-morrow will not send her off in quest of a cure which she knows to be hopeless; that the springs of healing to be visited, the southern cities to be sought, the painful pilgrimages of a hopeless malady, need no longer be undertaken. She is thankful for the rest and the repose, the respite and recollection of these rapidly lessening days. She seems already to have entered upon the fulfilment of that promised soothing security, 'where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.'

Of 'trouble' and 'weariness' she, poor Lady, has had full measure, pressed down and running over; but the dawn will soon break that shall show her the 'land o' the leal,' and the remembrance of the confused and troubled past with its hopes and fears, treacheries and betrayals, will for ever be wiped out in glorious certainty.

In this sure and certain faith she counts these last few days of farewell as precious, and even pleasant. She asks now and again for

those she has been used to see about her, chiefly for the young; and, in faint and laboured accents, tells each the message given her to speak. Now and again one of the sisters, at her request, reads to her a few verses of the Psalms, a page of the Testament, and, to the dying Christian, there is heavenly music in the holy words.

Her *lectrice*, a young and attractive lady of noble birth, she has dispensed from all duty. The tenure that she holds on life is so frail that all spiritual disharmonies are agonising to her. How ask a gay young creature, instinct with all the hopefulness of idle youth, fluttering in sportive vanity about the sunshine of Court-life, to bear the gloom of a dying-room, or to pronounce, with due reverence, words that should only be spoken by holy and humble lips?

Between the paroxysms of suffering and the exhaustion of pain there are times of respite. The merciful boon of sleep, though it be but artificial, becomes in place of a negative good, a positive blessing to the weary and restless patient. After sleep, periods of wonderful lucidity and calm come like a benediction, and those who see her at these moments bear away, in countenances softly beaming, a reflected

radiance of that glorified light which was 'never yet on earth or sea;' unless an awed Imagination may picture that supreme Sabbath, when the Almighty smile lit up complete Creation, and shone upon the Earth declaring 'It was good!'

She sent often for her children.

She would pass her thin transparent hand through the thick blonde locks of her last born, her Benjamin, and smile to think that this stalwart man, with the tawny mane and clear blue eyes of a Northern viking, had lain a helpless infant in her arms, gazing unseeing at the world which was to be its home. She admired the splendid young soldier in his glittering trappings, with his fine martial air, quick commanding manner, and healthy bloom, as the sculptor admires some work of his prime, seeing immortality in it.

This was her son; bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh, a creature proceeding from her, and still in so far her own, that no nearer tie had loosened the bond between them—mother and son. Of her other sons she saw less; they had their own duties, their own official life, their wives and families.

Her only daughter—married, some said un-

happily, whilst others declared hers, if any ever were, a pure love-match—had left the mother whilst she herself was yet too young for the relationship to be that of complete confidence, as between equal friends, though it had, undoubtedly, been one of tenderness and respect.

Coming again, after a period of absence, to the home of her birth, the young wife found her memory of the circumstances surrounding her maidenhood so wide of the actual truth, that she had to learn anew the conditions prevailing in her native country. Whatever difficulties or dangers might beset her own path, she made no sign of either, judging intuitively that the day had passed when her mother's repose could be endangered or troubled by a tale of the perplexed problems and tangled skein Destiny had set her daughter to unweave.

To disturb, with worldly cares, the peace of those who have squared accounts with Fate, and are content to abide, hopefully and humbly, the 'serene result of all,' must, even to less feeling natures, seem a sin; to sensitive ones, little short of the crime of sacrilege.

As the dying Empress lay waiting, her

mind went back to the days of her distant youth.

She remembered the simple homely life in the quaint old German Schloss, where the servants were all old, like the furniture and the pictures; where the fare was so simple and the etiquette so severe. She remembered her mother's endless 'Berlin wool-work' and knitting; her sisters' albums, in which they wrote out verses from their favourite poets, and treasured a lock of Goethe's hair, and sprigs of green from Schiller's garden. She remembered the private theatricals on her father's birthday, when they composed and repeated verses in his honour, instructed by her brother's 'governor' or tutor, and where she and all her grand-ducal brothers and sisters had acted in a comedy composed for the occasion by the same obliging gentleman. She remembered the summer boating-parties to an island, where they drank May-wine and sang verses in celebration of this native nectar; and the great shooting-parties in the autumn, when the young ladies were kept very strictly locked up, and their tasks doubled and quadrupled. The shots going off all day long made the girls nervous and restless, and with their soft-

hearted sentimentality they wrote poems to the 'Dying Deer,' the 'Hunted Hare,' the 'Fated Fox,' weeping real tears over many an antlered head. Then came a visit to Staub-Stadt, very dull, and stiff, and formal, where the ladies' spines seemed as straight as the sandy streets, and the buckram etiquette as unrelaxing and rigid as if they had been enemies received by hostile foes, instead of 'very dear brothers and cousins.' A winter in Vienna, where their best frocks called forth an amused ridicule that was never unkindly, and where something of the easy temper and gay frolic of the town was borne in upon their provincial pig-tail-and-powder stupidity and old-world angularity. Then the astounding news that their rather dull, very pompous, eldest grand-duc al heir-apparent was to make a grand marriage, and thereafter Court festivities, and gala-clothes, and junketing all the year round.

Then her own marriage. Her father's interview with her in his own shabby room, full of guns, and whips, and spurs, and pipes, whither she was summoned by the Court Chamberlain, and where her poor eyes had glanced timidly round at the antiquated rubbish, trying to escape the severity of the parental

gaze until a smart rap over the knuckles recalled, by practical appeal, her wandering attention. A story of exhausted credit, of expensive surroundings, of finished finances and disastrous prospects, all remediable by and through her.

It was like a fairy-tale in which she was the beneficent fairy. The will-less, timid, innocent, ignorant, young life was laid, as many such a miscalled 'serene' young life has been laid before, and will be laid hereafter, a willing sacrifice on the altar of duty, and the high priest was called upon to solemnly execute Iphigenia on the covenant-stone of matrimony. She had been told that her life must be changed, and it was changed. She was desired to alter her religion, and it was altered. The maiden became a matron and a mother, without choice, and, truth to tell, without vocation for either calling. Nature, which had intended her for a virgin and a saint, taught her to accept the sacred obligations of maternity, but could only exact a dull and spiritless submission to the yoke of wifehood.

Then, the fancy being past, the husband met estrangement half-way, and the wife spent

the time that they might have passed together, in praying Heaven to forgive his follies and his sins, and to avert the consequences of them from his head.

The drowsy warmth of the stove, the faint perfume of flowers and incense-powder, the murmur of the two waiting nuns, the monotony of the almoner's meditations, and the gentle doze of the confessor, announced a certain resigned and settled comfort that had nothing of the tension and the strain, usually the most wearing and weariful features of waiting and watching.

Suddenly the stillness was rent by a piercing shriek.

So wild, so weird, so eldritch, fraught with such agonised terror as made the hearers' hearts stand still. What was it? What had happened? With eyes full of awed questioning, and parted lips, anxiously straining their ears for what might follow, the priest and the almoner and the two holy women stood waiting, spell-bound.

Presently a message came from within. The patient had awakened suddenly in agonising distress of mind, and asked persistently for the Countess Helena Perowska. She must

come at once—at once; there could be no delay and no denial.

It was suggested that the Countess might be absent, that the messenger could not be sure of finding her. Should anyone else be fetched? Failing the Countess, would anyone else do as well?

Asking for a pen, with extraordinary energy the patient wrote a hasty line. It was only her own name.

'She will come. It is enough. Go at once,' she said, with the firm conviction of assurance; and lay back upon her pillows with closed eyes, to await the result of her autograph.

In less than half an hour the Countess was in the small drawing-room. The physicians were within. The attendants had sent hurriedly for them, and had told the story of their mistress's troubled sleep.

Explanation she herself refused to give. She took the soothing draught prescribed, and, with her eyes fixed on the door, lay waiting.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN KINGS' PALACES.

It was long since they had met.

With swift and silent footsteps Helena approached the bed, and kneeling, kissed the Imperial Lady's hand. A whole world lay between the two women.

Bigot though the world called her, there was enough of the woman still left in the dying Empress for her first thought to be a look of inquiry, as the light fell upon her former rival's upturned face.

'You are not changed,' she said, speaking half her thought, with a strange far-away smile, that a gleam the more would have converted into a curious kind of death-bed humour.

Her unexpressed mind was—'And yet he left you, as he left me.' Had she ever loved the man there would have been womanly

satisfaction, as for tardy compensation, in the thought. But her trouble had been, and was, that she had never loved him—that upon her shoulders lay perhaps the burthen of his frailty and his sin.

How changed at heart the beautiful woman on her knees really was, it would have shocked and startled the dying Saint to know. Indulgent fancy and unprejudiced surmise, painted Helena Perowska in the light of a forgiving wife, who, by her long tenure, and the many ties that the companionship of years binds withal would, after a due time allowed to offended dignity and wounded affection, condone the unfaithful past, receive the errant sinner, and reinstate him in his (never really lost) position. She, who could love the poor and the sick, the orphaned and widowed, the suffering and starving, had never known love. What she had forgiven—without forgiveness being so much as required of her—she took it for granted another could forgive. She had heard nothing but good of Helena whose influence had ever been exerted to generous ends; who had counteracted evil, and nobly fought on the side of the weak and oppressed, the poor man's faithful champion and ally.

And then, too, she had always been regular in her religious exercises. Brought up in the straightest tenets of Greek orthodoxy, the one fault of her life she had sought to balance and expiate by an untiring devotion to good works. Indeed, there had been few, if any, who regarded the irregularity of her position with strictly critical eyes ; strange to say, her Imperial mistress least of all. For whilst decency prevented courtiers from babbling of the beneficent influence of the modern Egeria within earshot of their Sovereign Lady, yet the neglected wife had openly confessed to herself that, since such things must be, it was well for all concerned that they should offend as little as did the Countess Perowsky's relations with Imperial Cæsar.

Somewhere, in the background of her mind, was a sense of relief ; it had ever been a heavy and uphill task for her, with her confessed deficiencies, to while away the Imperial gloom, and to beguile the discouragement and listlessness of Imperial leisure. She felt little, simple, poor, and unaffording in *tête-à-tête* hours of conjugal intercourse. Her tastes were all domestic, and her bringing up had fostered those tastes. She had no resources within her-

self, no confidence in her ability to please, much less to charm ; and the sense of her own unfitness for the task dulled her voice and took all courage out of her efforts. The first freshness of her bloom past, she lacked entirely those qualities which, under favourable conditions, make a wife her husband's best companion long after mere personal beauty has ceased to be a factor in the relationship.

To her mind, Helena had been well rescued from a brutal and dissolute husband, upon whom all her qualities, as well as the divine gift of her rare and gracious beauty, would have been but as the proverbial pearls cast before the dull insensible brute whose snout by preference grubs garbage from the mud. Not loving her husband, there was no wifely resentment against her rival in the poor lady's mind, nor was there even the sense of neglect to ruffle her contented calm. In ordinary life, the husband who neglects his wife, or who transfers his affections to another, soon marks the change of sentiment by material shortcomings. But kings and queens suffer no diminution of personal consideration or comfort through the private infidelity of the one or the other. The pomp and circumstance that wait

on kingly state wait on it though the heart be breaking; and a royal couple who never exchange a word in private, sit in public, side by side 'cooing and billing, like William and Mary on a shilling,' smiling graciously, models of conjugal fidelity and content.

For many years past the condition of the Empress's health had dispensed her from all State ceremonial; but daily her august spouse had paid her a visit in her private apartments, had kissed her hand, inquired after the state of her health, said a word or two as to their children. Set at ease by the independence of her position, knowing that her liberty was fully recognised, the Empress learned to play the part of hostess prettily enough. She was a lady receiving a casual guest, and it behoved her to make that guest's visit as pleasant as might be.

But these moods of ease and security alternated with periods of passionate remorse.

Had she been a better wife he would have been a better husband. Had she really striven to please Him instead of cowardly abandoning the attempt, they might have been an exemplary couple, faithful to their marriage vows. Those vows weighed heavily upon her. True, they were not of her seeking; but she had

taken them. That fact remained, and the morbidly tender conscience, the long habit of continual introspection, suggested that no coldness, no unfaithfulness on her husband's side, as no unfitness and unwillingness on hers, could dispense her from their fulfilment. Deep down, in the secret recesses of her heart, she knew there dwelt a guilty joy over the circumstances that put a period to that unwelcome wifehood, for which neither Nature nor education fitted her. And now, on the borderland of the future, a new revelation had come to her.

Her husband's visits suddenly ceased. Why? Long before Helena Perowska returned to learn the secret of how she had been supplanted, the Empress had fathomed the truth of that disinclination for all acknowledged duty which had extended itself even to the routine ceremonial observed towards her, during years, by the hopelessly infatuated Ruler of the land.

And now, in a torrent of rapid words, she disclosed to Helena Perowska her fears and her self-reproach.

As Helena listened, her soul seemed to expand in astonishment. Was it inspiration, illumination, revelation?

The fragile invalid, hidden in the innermost recesses of a perfumed palace, supposed to pass her time in a state alternating between religious ecstasy and somnolent lethargy, to which the murmured prayers of priests and bigots formed a monotonous accompaniment, calculated to lull the hearer back into semi-unconsciousness, yet, as by a miracle, alive to the imminent and pressing dangers by which the Throne itself was imperilled, and the person of the Emperor, the patent object of a thousand hatreds, deadly in their malice and revenge. As, one by one, the causes of this direful vengeance were unrolled, as the Empress poured into the astonished ears of her hearer the history of a hundred grievances and wrongs, combinations and plots, Helena could only hurriedly take a mental survey of the possibilities.

Were they betrayed? Was the almoner, an advanced yet unsuspected member of the party of discontent, a traitor to 'the Cause'—a renegade, betraying the secrets he had solemnly sworn to guard? Or was he only the enlightened historian of unwelcome facts, detailing them under the disguise of charitable reports, and the programme of philanthropic

enterprise? Were these facts or intuitions? Fancies or prophetic warnings? The insight of a transfigured soul, already rending the veil and piercing the clay; the fine spirit, divinely touched to finer issues; or were they mere fever-visions, the physical outcome of the poisoned blood, irritating the brain to morbid activity?

Kneeling still by the bedside, Helena Perowska kept the Empress's hand in her own, whilst the faint and feeble voice, in painful contrast with the fiery energy of her words, fell from the sufferer's lips almost upon her hearer's bended head. Had anyone else been in the room he could not have distinguished the thread of the Imperial sufferer's discourse, so husky, faint, and void of resonance were the feeble tones of that dying voice.

Then, in a few calmer words, the story of that sleeping vision which had wrung the scream from her unconscious lips was simply told. That shriek had curdled the blood of her hearers with terror. With awful distinctness she had seen the fearful vengeance overtaking its victim, and she described, down to its last horrible and appalling detail, the agonies of the sufferer. As she listened, Helena Perowska's

heart stood still. So, she knew, the Imperial fate was written; thus it was, inevitably, doomed to be. The thoughts she would not dare to define, the awful and complete particulars of that act of exemplary vengeance, were brought before her in words of vivid realism. All the superstition of her nature rose up, and condemned her part in life.

To this dying saint, to this wronged and injured woman, Heaven had revealed the mysteries of the future, and had summoned her former rival to receive her last, it might be her dying, words.

The deserted wife and the abandoned mistress, brought face to face by the threatened fate of Him who was faithless to both, all thoughts of mutual rivalry and wrong for ever set at rest.

But the legacy the dying Empress would fain leave behind, Helena was not at liberty to accept. Their positions, she told herself, were different. She had—overcoming every scruple of conscience—given herself, heart and soul, body and mind, to the man she loved. The dying woman had, on the contrary, been chained to the Emperor, whilst remaining profoundly indifferent to the Husband from whom

she had withdrawn herself. Had she loved the man she would not have let him go without a struggle, nor looked upon her successor with those 'larger, other eyes' which can only belong to the impartial impersonal looker-on.

Keeping herself pure of all reward, accepting no costly jewels, living in modest retirement, and gathering about her a circle of refined intelligences, Helena had never abused her influence or traded on her 'position.' She had strengthened a weak nature; she had widened narrow sympathies; she had increased liberal dispositions, and had fostered generous tendencies in a weak, suspicious, and vacillating mind. She had, with her brilliant accomplishments and delightful manners, known how to charm away that dark and gloomy melancholy which at one time had threatened to invade and overwhelm even the stronghold of intellect. She had been sweet and pleasant, serious and playful, and she had believed that only death could terminate a companionship which she prayed Heaven to view with mercy rather than with justice.

Illness, and the long strain and tension of an incessant 'bolstering up' of Imperial deficiencies, weaknesses, and shortcomings, had

driven her to seek strength for her anxious task in a more genial clime. She came back to find herself betrayed—doubly, trebly betrayed—and superseded.

Conscience told her that with the measure she had meted out another's fate, therewithal was her own now meted unto her. The sweetness of her nature turned to gall, milk to bitterness, and blood to revenge, the idea of Retribution left her no more. In all the deplorable and reprehensible results of a thousand official villanies, she thenceforth saw and accepted only one Responsibility. If the death of one man could expiate the inherited blunders and crimes of a succession, whose tenure of the throne was founded on a long legacy of crime and blunder, let that expiation be made. If the sacrifice of the 'single life' could free 'the type' and emancipate millions, let the freedom of the millions be celebrated, without regard to the unit cost.

And now, into her astounded ears, her dying and deserted Mistress was pouring pleas for mercy and forgiveness, painting, in impotent despair, the danger of an undermined position, the impatience of the people, the indignation of the educated, the patent folly

and scandal of an infatuation that had tolled the final knell of dignity, and held Cæsar up to public obloquy, scorn and derision.

‘Save Him from himself!’ she cried, ‘save him from the consequences which are only waiting at the gate. You can do it, and only you! I plead not for him alone, but for his children, and his children’s children, that blessings may follow him to the grave and rest upon his tomb, in place of cursing;’ and exhausted by the painful scene the Empress fell back upon her bed.

What answer to make to the impassioned appeal?

Had not Helena claimed, as a right, the execution of that act which was to result in the involuntary expiation for which the blood of many a martyr to social and political faith was crying from the ground? How pacify and reassure the dying ‘mother of kings to be,’ appealing in the name of maternity, of humanity, of religion against the execution of a summary and indiscriminating vengeance?

Helena was pledged. The convictions of settled and unwavering judgment could not be changed at the eleventh hour, by an appeal that only touched her for the pleader’s sake,

and left her cold and convinced in so far as the object of those pleadings were concerned.

The Holy Inquisition and the College of Jesuits could not have chosen their tools and agents more carefully than did the Council of the Propaganda. On him, to whom the lot finally fell, the execution of justice fell also. It was in opposition to every tradition and rule that any one member should claim executive rights. Volunteers might offer in desperate ventures, a forlorn hope might need a leader, but for any one member to arrogate to himself the privilege of independent action, could neither be countenanced nor allowed.

Yet, in Helena Perowska's case, it was felt that there were special claims to exceptional privileges. A faithless lover seems a very poor object to the looker-on, when compared, coolly and critically, with his faithful victim. Then again, Helena Perowska was beautiful and much beloved. Many a man would have been glad to avenge her cause, seeing nothing in it to stay his hand or damp his chivalry ; but no one had dared to offer himself as champion of her wrongs. Where a woman complains of no one, it is an invidious act to suggest the existence of an offender. Helena Perowska,

a softly-smiling, sweetly-serene, and beautiful woman, seemed far removed from the hideous image of the typical Fury. And besides and beyond all this, hers was a personality that Society could ill spare. No one would willingly connive at her risking exile and ignominy who could avert such a fate from her.

Kneeling still beside the bed, an attitude unnoticed by its occupant in the excitement of her address, Helena Perowska knew not what answer to make. She was pledged to her Cause. She had espoused it with all her heart. She must temporise.

‘Promise, promise!’ cried the dying Empress, faintly yet urgently.

‘Alas! such promises are vain. I no longer have the honour of His Imperial Majesty’s acquaintance. He would reject all attempts at a renewal of intercourse as an impertinence. It cannot be, Madam. Willingly as I would obey you in any other matter, this cannot be.’

‘Ah!’ cried the Empress, shuddering again, ‘that awful vision! I cannot clear my soul of it. Something of the responsibility rests with me. It will haunt me night and day.’

‘Nay, Madam, yours has been a blameless

life, without reproach as it now ought to be without fear. You have lived as you will die, a saint.'

'But since we were sent into the world as sinners, it were better perhaps to leave saintship for hereafter,' replied the Empress, again with that faint, far-off touch of humour, foreign to her valid days.

Helena had accomplished her design; the continuity of thought was broken, the difficulty and danger tided over. Rising from her knees she requested permission to withdraw, and promising to hold herself in readiness for Her Majesty's commands, she took a tender and respectful leave of the now partly-pacified sufferer.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM.

SOMETHING of the scruples and sanctity of the sick room clung to Helena Perowska, causing her much anxious thought and self-examination. It could be kept no secret from Mellin. But the news of it went no further, unless mysterious rumours which began to fly about the city might be vaguely understood to have some connection with the matter.

It was said that the Empress had dreamed a dream of terrible import, and that the cry she uttered on awakening had been taken up and repeated by a huge white bird, whose presence on the palace roof had not been suspected until it rose into the air, repeating its wild and mysterious note of warning in exact accordance of key, and in unison with, the Imperial sufferer's awakening scream. It was said that the bird had flown away eastwards,

and had since then been seen no more. Some there were who declared the bird of ill-omen to be the precursor of the Empress's death; others said that it was the Angel of Death himself; and yet others, that it was a traditional fowl which always appeared before the demise of any member of the Imperial family.

In a country where there is so much superstition and so many idlers as in Russia—or, at any rate, St. Petersburg, given the text—a hundred gossiping follies and vagaries will follow in easy succession. The white bird had appeared in warning to the Emperor. It was supposed to predict evil to him. Suddenly it was changed into a black bird, then it ceased to be a bird at all. It was a spectre; and by degrees the ghostly visitant was insensibly made to assume the speech and language, or, at least, the would-be utterances and opinions, of each individual *raconteur*. It gave the idlers something to talk about.

‘Hypatia!’

Mellin had advertised in the *Ruski Mir*.

Time was pressing.

Helena Perowska, whose daily visits to the Winter Palace now made her from certain points of view, the very person fittest to under-

take the enterprise in hand, could for reasons very clear to Mellin's impartial mind no longer be called upon to carry out its execution.

Her nerves were shaken, her hand no longer sure.

In the absence of any available individual, he thought of the Mask who had announced such life-weariness—such enthusiastic devotion—as to be willing to part with existence itself so the sacrifice might further the final interests of 'the Cause.' He had directed the person in question to come to him at his official residence, whither came many (both male and female) applicants daily, with statements of grievances to be adjusted, arrears of pension to be paid, immunities and indemnities to be granted.

'Let the person in, and do not disturb me again until I call you,' he said to the servant, who brought him a card on which was printed 'Hypatia,' and a word used to designate fidelity to 'the Cause.'

'I have come in answer to your advertisement,' said Bianca, turning back the long black veil that covered her face.

Silence was the only adequate expression of Mellin's exasperation.

His usual melancholy civility utterly forsook

him. With what he later owned to himself to be an entirely irrational, inexcusable, and foolish wrath, he turned roughly upon her.

‘What foolery is this? What comedy-acting has sentimentality inspired you with?’

The brutal incivility of his address stung Bianca to retort :

‘I have yet to learn where the foolery lies.’

Had he cast a second look at her, he might have been more merciful. He condescended to no such attention.

The months had changed Bianca sadly. Disappointment was eating into her heart and undermining her health. Her eyes looked unnaturally large and lustrous, and the snow outside was scarcely whiter than her wan cheeks. She had waited and hoped, in her devotion to an irrational, impossible Ideal; and as each day brought its sting of jealousy, its blank of deferred hope, or its wound of indifference, the girl’s high spirit suffered torments inconceivable to colder natures and cooler blood.

This man was her hero.

To her he embodied all that was noble, philanthropic, unswerving, devoted, heroic. She wanted nothing of him but what he could easily give—a little confidence, a little esteem,

a little sympathy, a word of encouragement, a glance of approval or kindness. Did she wish to bring him off his pedestal, to lower him to the common level, to diminish the distance between her insignificance and his importance? No! She could think of Mellin in none of the ordinary relations of life. As a lover, a husband, a father, he would cease to be Mellin—the Mellin she knew and worshipped. If other women, as in her insane jealousy she accused Esther Rodostamos of doing, sought his favour, her dumb exasperation and contempt pursued the delinquent. But what had she done that he should so persistently ignore and overlook her? For a moment she forgot that he was a demi-god, and she answered him with a tartness and a resentment which the ordinary mortal does not bear without some sign of retributive temper.

‘Does the Countess know of this?’

‘No.’

‘Then, if you will allow me’ (recovering his usual tone of cold politeness, which in Bianca’s ears sounded like the sharpest satire), ‘I will send for a droschky, that you may at once return home.’

He told himself that the sight of Bianca

always annoyed him. He had an idea that he had done unwisely in picking up this troublesome pebble, which seemed to have a talent for getting into his shoe at inopportune moments, and threatening to lame the pedestrian in his political pilgrimage. She reminded him, by her irritating likeness and unlikeness, of her mother ; and it annoyed him to feel that, after all these years, he was weak enough to regret a happiness that never could be his.

‘No,’ said Bianca, ‘no ; you shall not send me away. What have I done ? Why am I not to be spoken to ? Why do you treat me with contempt ? And, if you are forced to speak to me, why do it in such a way that others might believe I had forfeited your esteem ?’

‘Stuff ! People are not concerned either about you or me.’

Despite his good resolutions, the Tartar was getting the better of the Russian’s polish.

‘You did not treat me so in Germany.’

This was true ; but Mellin did not intend to be drawn into argument.

‘Mlle. Martello,’ he said stiffly, ‘you will oblige me by leaving this house. A young lady should not pay visits unaccompanied. If you have any fault to find with my conduct, make

your statement to the Countess Perowsky, and she will doubtless call me to account on your behalf. May I again suggest that a droschky be sent for, and that you retire?'

'No,' Bianca answered, 'or if you do I shall not go. I am determined to speak; it is cruel, heartless, shameful. Why am I not allowed to do anything? Why cannot you use me for the work you intended Hypatia to do? I came out here because you had taught me devotion was the first duty to 'the Cause;' and now—you despise me, reject me, treat me as though I had committed some unpardonable offence. It is not fair. It is ungenerous, inhospitable, inhuman. I claim my rights. I demand to know why you ignore me.'

What lurking devil crept into secret council? Why did Mellin suddenly come to a mental pause, and, failing time to follow out the text, make a memorandum that should help him to a full and clear consideration of the issues at stake?

'*Why should he not employ her as he had designed to employ Hypatia?*' True, the risks were immense; but if Fate removed this stumbling-block from his path, was he to blame?

The event was not in his hand, and one life is worth another.

There is a certain kind of blue eye which, in repose, is veiled and soft, but when animated by secret anger becomes coldly, malignantly cruel. For one brief moment such a gleam betrayed itself in Mellin's sudden glance as he looked at Bianca. Then the habit of self-control resumed its sway, and the ruthlessness that shone there disappeared.

Before she left him, Bianca was partially initiated into the project for which her services might be required. Yet, as he would have no secret understanding with her, the Countess should be instructed and consulted before the ultimate design was confided to the willing instrument of their combination, who was to take Helena Perowska's place.

The winter wore its wearisome length gloomily towards spring. A sense as of something impending, a suppressed impression of tension made the surface-stillness and inaction painfully apparent. The pressure of public insecurity was felt in private life. No one seemed to have spirit to undertake anything. Social and commercial enterprise, if not dead, was slumbering. Of political enterprise it was

difficult to formulate so much as the faintest prophecy. All things were possible to him who would only wait; but meantime nothing was done. The optimists believed in the approach of the Millennium; the pessimists predicated of the inaction, that it was but the lull before the storm.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

‘A GOOD AUNT.’

LADY ROCKMINSTER belonged to a class of persons by no means so scarce as their enemies would fain believe them to be. To say of her that she was ill-bred, or underbred, was to say nothing. She simply had no breeding at all; and if the individual could have been found bold enough to tell her so, she would have replied that the fact, if fact it were, was of no consequence.

Persons of a certain rank flatter themselves that they can dispense with breeding, just as they imagine that they can dispense with dress. To Clothing, as a concession to the conveniences, they will conform; but, provided it have the leafiness of the fig, all other attributes are superfluous. It need not be graceful, or flowing, or artistic, or harmonious; it may be threadbare, scanty, ugly, and—alas that truth exacts the confession!—dirty.

The primeval Peverils, who may be supposed to have run ‘wild in woods’ and woad, wielding wooden clubs and stone axes as science and knowledge advanced, and the noble art of self-defence became a necessary accomplishment for the cadets of great families in the Peak district—had never had any manners to speak of; and it behoved the latter-day Peverils not to degenerate into the *suaviter in modo* of invertebrate civilisation, to the oblivion of that *fortiter in re* by virtue of which they had held their own from immemorial ages.

The late Lord Rockminster had been a feeble and effete specimen of a sporting lord. He was born rickety, and his efforts at tobacco, drink, and miscellaneous vices had made him an old man before he had attained his majority. It was his boast that he was neither tenth nor twentieth ‘transmitter of a foolish face;’ he liked to think, and was wont to boast, that at his decease, his noble race, as transmitters of foolish faces, would be extinct. He kept racing stables, betted wildly, and, mistaking prodigality for generosity of living, gave himself over to the reckless society of trainers, jockeys, grooms, and stablemen.

Rumour reported that the Rockminster

drawing-room was the scene every wet Sunday of what the owner called ‘a quiet mill ;’ and if professional boxers came down from Town late on Saturday night, and the noble lord and his friends liked to beguile the tedium of a rainy Sabbath by gentle bets on the White-chapel Smasher and the Tipton Pet, backing Bargee Bill against the West of England Champion, and *vice versâ*, who should say that the young gentlemen were less innocently occupied, in thus encouraging the national art of self-defence, than the plumed dowagers nodding and whispering away characters, and killing reputations over the cheering cup which—breaking the dull monotony of long Sunday afternoons—may almost be said to develop inebriating properties.

But when the young gentleman’s shaky health, trembling knees, and tottering finances made a nurse and a wife necessary, the Marquis of Matlock, a friend of his father’s youth, recommended his own youngest sister, Lady Jane Peveril, for the situation.

The little rickety Lord was told she would take care of him, and he obeyed the Marquis and married his sister. A clean sweep was made of his familiars ; the property was

nursed ; Lord Rock was taken abroad, and after three years Lady Rock was a widow. The men at the club had set jokes going about poor little Rockminster. In allusion to the way in which wily crows had plucked this innocent pigeon, they called him 'the blue Rock,' and made riddles which, in those circles, were considered brilliantly witty, playfully alluding to his name and his marriage, to which event (and the plucking aforesaid) he was supposed to owe that azure tint coupled by his quondam companions with the abbreviated form of his noble patronymic.

As he had shuffled off this mortal coil long before our story begins, even this curt obituary notice would be superfluous, but that it tends to enlighten the reader as to Lady Rockminster's freedom, functions, and confirmed habits of officious tyranny.

The years of matrimony, which had been years of timid obedience to little Lord Rock, had been a period of undisputed authority to his exacting spouse ; and when he died and she had ordered cheap mourning enough to last the two years of vidual affliction, she began at once to look round for a new though not necessarily a conjugal victim.

Meantime, she had grown rich. As a mistress of her art she flew at high game, and boldly declared that none other was 'worth the candle.' To subdue a paid dependent, to quell a poor relation (of Rockminster's—there were no poor Peverils) could afford her no adequate gratification. She kept up a sort of internecine war with the parson of the parish, because, to be at peace would be to deprive her of the chief amusement, or excitement, of her country life; she was rude to everybody; insolent to the county ladies; wrangled freely with the farmers' wives, and was the terror of all the circumjacent clergywomen. Age and infirmity had brought even the Marquis of Matlock under her sway. 'That woman's tongue is like the iron clapper of a brazen bell,' he would say testily, interlarding his complimentary remarks with expletives and oaths; nevertheless, he knew, when she struck the hour, his time had come, and words would be worse than wasted.

She had rather liked the late Lord Dove-dale, an indolent invalid, as feeble as the poor little 'blue rock,' without the rickety Lord's shaky hands or rackety vices. She had intended to arrange, indeed she flattered herself

that she had arranged, a marriage for him with a young lady of title, whose pedigree was as ancient as her mind was empty. But Lord Dovedale had declined entering upon any sort of matrimonial engagement, and within a few months had passed beyond his aunt's aggressive tyranny, and joined the great majority.

But Lord George, she declared to herself, now by his brother's death become a personage of importance, should not escape her. The succession to the house of Peveril was endangered. The situation demanded prompt action. The line must not be suffered to fall extinct for want of a little timely energy. George was strong, and could stand a deal of worrying. Perhaps, too, he was headstrong, and would need to be convinced that he could not have his own way; that is, unless his way should be hers also. Thank goodness, he was not romantic; they had nothing to fear in that direction. But it behoved them to act with energy. The Marquis was getting old and apathetic. No matter: he could be dealt with hereafter, should special dealing prove necessary.

So Lady Rockminster ordered her bag to be made ready to go down to Peveril Park.

As she still wore black, and as the *répertoire* of her toilette only consisted of two gowns, a rusty bombazine for daylight, a rusty black silk, void of all trimming or adornment, for evening wear, she required no luggage and no maid, and took neither. At the Junction where she had to change carriages, she grasped her own bag and umbrella, and waving off troublesome porters, stumped down the platform, pleased to think she had disappointed these rapacious idlers of the tributary sixpence.

More than once it had happened that, arriving with a crowd of other guests at a great house, she had been confounded by the housekeeper with the soberer class of Abigail supposed to be in attendance on some obscure old lady. Profuse apologies and terrified explanations followed these mistakes, to which caustic answers and ruthless replies would be returned; but, to do her justice, Lady Rockminster harboured no malice against the good woman who had failed to detect the *sangre azul* which flowed beneath the shabby garments affected by her ladyship.

The Marquis uttered a testy protest when he got her note announcing her arrival in the course of a few hours. He bore it, but ‘he

could not grin.’ Yet, as Lady Rockminster had never set any fictitious value on her brother’s smiles, she was philosophically prepared to dispense with them on the present occasion.

Giving him a large and bony hand, clad in grey cotton gloves, of which the fingers, always too long, had a tendency to develop flat tabs, destructive of all sense of satisfaction in what our neighbours call ‘le schak-hand,’ Lady Rockminster proceeded at once to business.

‘I’ve come about this marriage of George’s,’ she said, as the valet left the room.

‘Which marriage?’

‘Good heavens! You don’t mean to say that the wretched boy has got into any entanglement already?’

‘Who said I did?’

‘Well, you asked “Which marriage?” as though there were several on the *tapis*. If you had said “What marriage?” I should have supposed simply that you had not heard of the one I have to propose to you.’

‘And don’t want to hear.’

‘Well, at any rate, I am glad to know that I am first in the field. You may not like to hear it, but though you are a wonderful man,

you are a very old man, and you ought to see grandchildren about you before you die.'

'Thomson says my constitooshun's as good as ever.'

Thomson was the body-surgeon, and regarded by Lady Rockminster as being several degrees lower in the social scale than Martin, the valet. She called him an 'apothecary,' as she used to call the chaplain, her nephew's tutor—the Reverend Adolphus Moon, a most sweet young divine from Cambridge, with an elaborate curl on his white and expansive brow, 'and quite a way with him,' as the housemaids said,—'the usher' and 'the schoolmaster.' So she contented herself with saying :—

'George's children won't impair your constitution, and as it's to the apothecary's interest to keep you alive, I dare say he's to be believed for once.'

'Besides, I hate children.'

'Your own, of course, might be a bother to you; but George's you need never see, unless you like. It would be a disgraceful thing if the unbroken line were to die out now, for want of a little forethought.'

To this the Marquis only grunted out an inaudible reply, wishing his man would come

in, wishing the dressing-bell might ring, wishing his sister in any remote spot on, or under the earth, rather than just opposite to him on the hearthrug. But as he knew he had to endure her, he hoped that the twilight mercifully descending would hide the slumbers he settled himself to fervently invoke.

He was roused by a question.

‘When is George coming home? I thought he only went over to settle about his things?’

‘I don’t know about “only.” He went over.’

‘And hasn’t been back?’

‘Oh, yes. He’s been back. When did Lord Dovedale come back, Martin?’

This was an artful device, suggesting a belief in Martin’s presence as a matter of course.

‘Martin is playing at cards, no doubt, with the housekeeper. It makes me sick to think of how you are cheated by the army of idle people you keep on the premises. You don’t want Martin, however, since I’m not particular as to the date. So he *has* been back, that’s all I care to know?’

‘Well, you can know that.’

‘Did you open the subject to him?’

‘What subject?’

‘Why, *the* subject, of course. What have we been talking of for the last hour?’

‘I have not been talking at all.’

‘The subject of his marriage?’

‘It was t’ other way round.’

‘Which way? What do you mean?’

‘He opened upon me. Of course I let him talk; I won’t hear of it. I will never consent. He can do as he pleases. He is of age. It’s a scandal, that’s what it is; not even a gentlemanly scandal.’

‘I don’t understand a word of what you’re talking about. Where is George now?’

‘At St. Petersburg.’

‘What has he gone there for? I thought you said he had settled his affairs.’

‘After this d——d Jewess!’ cried the Marquis, giving the objectionable word a large and emphatic amplitude that was as balm to his soul.

To Lady Rock the announcement conveyed nothing so very appalling.

Lord Rockminster’s early natural history had not been without its piquant details, and he would almost roll off his sofa as he recounted with shrieks of laughter stories of the

rapacity and vulgarity of the ladies, with whose presence he had been wont to adorn his bachelor banquets.

Once Lady Rockminster had gone to the theatre in Paris, and had seen a tall, pale, lithe woman, her head bound with a Greek fillet, her white robes falling in straight lines like sculptured marble to the floor, at whom the whole house rose, applauding with frantic shrieks one of Rachel's greatest triumphs.

It had all been a mystery to her. A 'play-actor,' as she called the histrion, was in her eyes nothing but a mountebank; and as she had been brought up with a fine old British Conservative contempt for the genus 'foreigner,' she had not been surprised that a company of apes should chatter, and weep, and gesticulate, over the imperfect imitation of themselves, given by a popular female mummer.

Her experience being narrow, and her imagination *nil*, she went back to such facts as she knew for comfort and enlightenment. And between Lord Rockminster's confidences and her own observation, she arrived at the conclusion that her nephew had been fascinated by the oriental charms of a rolling-eyed, black-haired, long-nosed lady of the ballet, so

much as to mention whom, was an unnecessary condescension. From the point of view of morality her ladyship felt no qualms. Her youth had not been spent in the Matlock atmosphere for nothing.

‘Bah!’ she said contemptuously, ‘it’s of no consequence.’

But before she left the room to change the rusty black bombazine for the rusty black silk, she had been forced to arrive at a different conclusion.

‘I shall write to Adamant, and start at once for St. Petersburg,’ she said. ‘I shall not give him time to reply; so, whatever he may say, it will come to the same thing.’

The prospect of getting rid of her so much sooner than he had expected, made the Marquis positively affable.

‘It will cost you a lot of money,’ he said.

‘It might you; it won’t me.’

‘You had better take my second-best fur cloak. I will tell Martin to send for it to the furrier’s.’

And with the Marquis of Matlock’s second-best fur cloak, brandy flask, and a box of Huntley and Palmer’s most husky biscuits, the fond aunt made her journey to St. Petersburg.

Lord Adamant, who was a distant connection, had sent her a letter full of the prohibitive horrors of the climate and the dangers incident to Nihilist plots, and was therefore doubly dismayed when she entered his presence late one evening, just as he was going off to dine with a popular Grand Duke.

In his twofold capacity of cousin and diplomatist, he was pledged to a certain measure of civility, and as Lady Rockminster plainly told him she expected to reside at the Embassy, he had no alternative but to order rooms to be got ready for her and her maid. No one likes to tell a rude, rich old woman that she must go to an hotel, if she declares her intention of occupying a part of his house; and as Lady Rock boldly declined to be the prey of thieves, robbers, bad cooking, long bills, and vermin, there was nothing for it but to make *'bonne mine au mauvais jeu.'*

'That terrible old woman, your aunt, has come to fetch you home,' he said to Lord Dovedale, against whom he stumbled, going up Esther Rodostamos's staircase at midnight.

'Not really?' said Dovedale, only half believing it.

'True. She has taken up her quarters at

the Embassy. It's a mercy that Lady Adamant can't make up her mind to leave Paris, or there would have been—well, let us, for euphony's sake, say unpleasantness.'

'My aunt, Lady Rockminster, has come from England,' said Lord Dovedale to Esther an hour later.

'Oh, how nice for you. You should have brought her to my little party.'

And she passed on to speak to new arrivals.

Even Lord Dovedale, obstinate and simple as he was, could not but smile at Esther's sublime unconsciousness. He, who knew his aunt's prejudices, her exclusiveness and insolence, was amused to see how Esther took it for granted that his aunt would accept her unquestioningly, and come to her party as a matter of course; and yet he had no word to say when later on, in the course of a quadrille, Esther asked pleasantly:—

'Is your aunt very handsome? English ladies generally are. They wear so well; indeed, I have seen some who appeared to me more attractive than their own daughters.'

'My aunt is a rude, vulgar old woman!'

'How can that be? Lady Rockminster, *née* Peveril?'

‘All the Peverils are very commonplace. That is our grand quality. She has only two gowns in the world, and is much shabbier than your kitchenmaid.’

‘Ah! she is pious and gives to the poor.’

‘She abominates the poor, and she never gives to anyone. She thinks the poor are poor out of obstinacy or spite, or to extort money, or for some occult and villainous reason.’

‘She loves you, at any rate, very much, to come all this way to see you.’

‘She loves her own way. She loves meddling. She loves to govern and to tyrannise. Poor little Lord Rock, who was ever so much younger than she was, found it easier to die than to live under her *régime*, and yet she nursed his property, and took care of him, and freed him from the harpies who were eating him out of house and home.’

‘And now she has come to take you back to England. That is what I call a good aunt.’

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

‘ THAT MAN.’

LADY ROCKMINSTER, who had been accustomed once a year to pray for Jews, Turks, Infidels, and Heretics (at the same time congratulating Providence on the prevision that had provided the world with Peverils), whose idea of an ancient race was confined to money-lenders, tight-rope dancers, old clothes, and certain dim and dingy streets in most of the capitals of Europe (to the entrance of which the courier conducted distinguished travellers, saying something about the middle ages, merchant princes, and red shields), could not be expected to master ‘at one sitting’ the sublime fact that a Jewess had refused, and persistently refused, during the last two years, to marry that county magnate, the future Marquis of Matlock.

‘I came over here to see about things for

myself,’ she said. ‘ Of course your father let fall a word. I can’t say I was much troubled, however, as that sort of hussy can generally be bought off or disposed of in some fashion ;’ adding, after a pause, ‘ what sort of person is your “ own man ? ” If he is anything like Martin—whose brother my woman tells me he is—he’s very accommodating.’

The relevancy of the remark did not appear, but Lady Rock seldom spoke without a meaning.

‘ He does his duty fairly well. “ *Accommodating* ” servants are generally rascals. Nor do I desire to be “ accommodated,” ’ said Lord Dovedale dryly. ‘ No man is called on to do more than his duty. What did my father say ? ’

‘ He said “ that d——d Jewess,” ’ Lady Rockminster answered, giving the objectionable word in Brobdignagian capitals, after the matter-of-fact manner of the Peverils.

‘ Ah ! he will not say that when he sees her portrait, still less when he sees herself.’

‘ What’s the painting-man going to get for it ? ’

By the ‘ painting-man ’ she meant Graham, with whom she had by this time become acquainted. He had been presented to her at an

evening reception at the British Embassy, and had been bidden by someone to make himself agreeable.

Lady Rockminster was far too patriotic and Conservative to speak any language but her own, yet she was apt to become illogically irritable and impatient when, of all the varied conversations going on around her, she could not understand a single word. That her ignorance rebounded upon herself did not occur to her; she simply thought it very ill-bred that the people about her did not restrict themselves to the English language. Thus she was glad to reduce her rule of stern exclusiveness, and condescended to admit such persons to her acquaintance as under other circumstances she would not have vouchsafed to acknowledge.

Although she knew Mr. Graham's name perfectly well, she affected not to consider it worth remembering. It marked her sense of his social inferiority to call him 'that man,' trusting to the context for concordance; or the 'painting-man,' which included his trade whilst it equally excluded his patronymic. To her apprehension, to speak of him as 'Mr. Graham' would be to acknowledge his entity, which,

according to her peculiar theories, had no existence apart from her temporary recognition of it. Nevertheless, as she was inquisitive, her pride did not prevent her asking him any amount of questions, which Graham answered as loyally, with regard to his friends, and as truthfully, with regard to the lady (if not altogether without a spice of malice) as his conscience would permit.

'Well, I'm vexed the little upstart isn't here, for I can't imagine what there is to make such a fuss about in "*a parvenu*."'

'Excuse me, Madam, Esther Rodostamos, if it is of her you are speaking, is no "upstart." She is a modest, intelligent, very beautiful young lady.'

'Well enough for her sphere of life, I dare say. I have no patience with some people's folly. Of course they run after her for her money. As if the American shoddy and oil people were not a proof of that every day, though I believe even they have the *pas* of usurers.'

'Stephen Rodostamos was not a usurer, unless you call the Drummond's, the Baring's, and the Coutts', and such as they, usurers.'

'A low Jew.'

‘He was a Greek, of pure pedigree, I am told ; I don’t go in for that sort of thing much myself. It is on the mother’s side that Esther Rodostamos claims Jewish descent. The Spanish Jews, as you no doubt know, became a feature, an element, and if history may be believed, Dons and Hidalgos, a great power in the State. The Spanish Jews are, or claim to be, the aristocracy of their race, as they can trace their descent from the House of David and the tribe of Judah ; and tradition affirms that they were settled in Spain long before the fall of Jerusalem. History is full of the names of these princely Jews, who, accepting the comparatively modern patent of mediæval nobility in the land of their adoption, have been handed down in stately generations to us in the Alvarez, the Villaréals, the Mendozas, the de Castros, the de Costas, the Salvadors, and half a hundred other familiar names of modern Spain. Esther Rodostamos’s mother was a da Costa, therefore of ancient Spanish pedigree.’

This was appealing to Lady Rockminster’s weak point, and for a moment she was silenced.

‘You can’t deny that the sound of the thing

is awful,’ she said, bluntly, plucking up her courage after a few minutes’ silence.

‘The sound of what thing?’

‘Why, that a Peveril, the future Marquis of Matlock, should marry a Jewess.’

‘A popular misapprehension may make it so ; but western aristocracy is a very mushroom affair compared with that of an ancient race whose kings and princes have left records of such marvellous wisdom, splendour, and kingly state as we find in the stories of the kings of Israel. The most ancient aristocracy in Europe is a thing of yesterday compared with it ; and when I hear people laboriously explaining that a distinguished Jewish statesman is not a *parvenu* because he can claim ancestry who flourished under the Venetian Republic, I can only smile at the superficiality and ignorance which chalks that up, as an exceptional and specially satisfactory feature in a race, whose kings and princes were of extraordinary antiquity at the beginning of the Christian era.

‘Why don’t you marry her yourself?’ asked the lady, vexed and baffled, yet not knowing what to object to the argument.

‘If you knew Esther Rodostamos, Madam, you would not ask me such a question.’

There was implied rebuke in Graham's grave tones and still graver face. The manner of his address was unconventional, yet could not be designated impolite; and when he shortly afterwards rose and left her rude ladyship to 'chew the cud of sweet and bitter' comment, she felt a general sense as of reproof, that nettled her dominant spirit.

'A very upstart, underbred person, your friend, the painting-man, George,' she said to her nephew next day. 'I suppose he was brought up for a village schoolmaster before he took to painting sign-posts. I have observed that that obscure sort of person always assumes airs of independence, and tries to appear very learned. It's like grocers' assistants; they are obliged to know how to spell and write, so that they may be correct in making out the bills, you know.'

'Poor old Graham!' said Lord Dovedale, kindly; 'he's an Oxford man, so I suppose he's mastered the three R's; and he had a tidy little property of his own at one time——'

'What! alone?' said Lord Adamant, as he came upon the angry Dowager, after Graham had taken his ceremonious leave. 'What would you like to do? Make a tour of the

rooms? I'm afraid your ladyship is dull! Fact is, not half my people have come. All the world and his wife are *chez la belle Esther*, where private theatricals are the order of the night.'

'What impertinence in a person of that sort presuming to compete with an Embassy reception! But I am sick of the young woman's very name. Why don't you call her Miss, or Mademoiselle, or Frowlean, or whatever's the Russian for it? I can understand calling a milliner Jane Clarke, or an actress Rose Green; but why a young lady should be spoken of by every jackanapes after that familiar fashion, unless she's an impudent baggage, I can't understand!'

'Baggage, me no baggages!' said Lord Adamant, smiling his most courteous smile. 'I take it there's a little bit of sentiment, and a good bit of Russian in it. You know my swineherd may address me by my unvarnished patronymic in Russ. As, for instance, "Michael, son of Gregory, incline thine ear." And then there is a something about Esther Rod——well—the young lady in question, so unconventional, so out of the common, so original, and simple, and altogether natural, that "Miss"

seems to vulgarise her. You might as well say Miss Hebe or Miss Galatea to Pygmalion's famed creation as Miss Rodostamos to our *belle* Esther. No! taking it all round, we can't improve on Esther Rodostamos for appropriate picturesqueness.'

'As to picturesqueness, better leave that to the painting-man. You all of you talk a great deal of nonsense about her. I only hope you don't encourage my poor deluded boy.'

'It is plain you don't know anything of passports. Dovedale, whom I presume you mean, is neither poor, deluded, nor a boy. He strikes me as a young man who knows uncommonly well what he wants.'

'Laugh if you like ; but for all that he will find that he can't marry the young person.'

'Because she won't have him ! By the way, you must be careful how you speak. These Russians are terrible linguists, and English comes to them in the cradle. Esther Rodostamos is *bien vue à la cour*. Her father's services, her own beauty, and her fabulous wealth, make her a great little personage——'

'And Russia is called a Conservative country !'

'I can forgive such Conservatism as that !'

‘ Just like a man. Because of a pretty face you are ready to forswear a principle.’

‘ As you always knew I was a man, you can’t justly find fault with me for my masculine imperfections. And it so happens that in the present instance the Man jumps with the Minister.’

Out of these and a dozen similar conversations Lady Rockminster gathered but small comfort. She had expected a ballet-girl and she found a muse, or a goddess, or a queen, or anything else of an exceptional, phenomenal, majestic, or extravagant nature, according to the person and mood of the victim of Esther’s charms. Here was no question of buying off, bribing into good behaviour, pensioning, or enlisting the services of the valet. She had, for once, allowed her imagination, or the paucity of her information and the impatience of her temper, to mislead her ; she felt her position to be absurd, and she confessed that her calculations were useless.

‘ You can’t spend your life running after a woman who won’t look at you,’ she said, not unjustly, to her nephew, hoping the scoff might rouse his pride.

‘ I not only can, I do.’

‘Duty calls you home. Your father.’

‘Does he? Did he say so?’

And Lady Rock, who would have told the lie duty expected of her, without flinching, like the blunt Britannia that she was, could only wag her head in feeble protest, as who should say ‘Not exactly; but he ought, and so ought you.’

‘Ought I to call on Lady Rockminster?’ Esther asked artlessly of Graham. ‘What is the etiquette? You know, and I don’t. She is the stranger; but then she is a great lady, and it might look like forwardness, or presumption, or ill-breeding on my part. I have lived in so many different places that I am quite confused on these points. You English are too proud, as a rule, to make the first advances. You expect us to take you at your own estimate, and to crave the honour of your acquaintance, your pride and reserve notwithstanding. In other countries it is the stranger, the new-comer, who presents his credentials, and leaves his cards.

Graham, who was aware of Lady Rockminster’s sentiments, could not, whatever the etiquette of the case, and of that he was equally ignorant with his questioner, advise

Esther to call upon her autocratic ladyship.

'I don't pretend to understand this sort of thing myself,' he said, 'but if she wants to know you, she can easily do so through her nephew. Lady Rockminster is a very rude, and I think a very vulgar old woman. She prides herself upon what she calls "speaking the truth ;" but then, she believes that she has a monopoly of the truth, and no one else must attempt to do to her as she does to others. If you had been at the Embassy the other night you would have come across her naturally ; as you were not, I should leave her alone.'

But, by degrees, Lady Rock was almost driven to crave an introduction to the object of her animosity. Lord Dovedale was not disposed to resent his aunt's backwardness. He feared her uncouth manner might encourage Esther's unfavourable disposition, and he could not bear the idea of his bright, unaffected, artless Love being hurt or wounded by a peevish old woman. 'Now that you know I'm not in love with a ballet-girl, aunt, it seems to me your mission is at an end.'

'I consider this far worse, George. I cannot think what drop of degenerate blood in

you can blind you to the absurdity of dreaming such a marriage possible.' But when Lord Dovedale had pointed out that the contemporary world was governed very much by members of the Jewish race; when he spoke of D'Israeli, recognised already in his green and *salat* days by the wit of the woman on whose head he later had the triumph of placing a viscountess's coronet, whilst he refused a peerage for himself (the idol of the proudest aristocracy in the world); when he told her that Bismarck's maternal grandmother had been a Jewess, and that Lasker and Simson in Prussia, Achille Fould, Crémieux, and Gambetta in France, as well as the Esterhazys in Austria were either of Hebrew origin or had Jewish blood in their veins; that Napoleon's marshals, Soult and Masséna, had both been Jews, the good lady was fain to cry mercy, and to confess that the government of the world and the aspects of the body politic, good, bad, or indifferent, owed much to the presence of Jewish intellect and Jewish character in its council chambers. He pointed to half a dozen well-known names, Conservative and Liberal, in the alternating British ministries of Oriental origin, and socially he

brought forth examples of Jewish ladies, notably One, of whom the whole world spoke (and speaks) affectionately and respectfully, who, herself born in a modest sphere of life, the daughter and the sister of professional men, had yet so well known how to win all suffrages that 'Society' had accepted her without question as one of its most popular leaders. Her salon, rivalling that of the then Prime Minister, had included all that was best in birth and talent of the day, and her conduct, tact, and sweetness of nature had been such that she had won and held the affections of four successive husbands, and had worn her coronet and her ermine with a grace so consummate that no other vice-Queen had, within the memory of man, illustrated so popular and brilliant a viceregal court as hers.

To point to the strange supremacy of a marvellous race in the realms of art and science, to advocate and demonstrate the aristocracy of intellect, would, in Lady Rock's case, have been but love's labour lost; but when her nephew told her of the European fame and the vast political and social influence of Rahel, a Prussian Jewess without wealth or the prestige of either beauty or birth, who,

in the earlier part of the century had reigned supreme in the modest Berlin drawing-room where Varnhagen von Ense delighted to see not only the homage of princes and potentates but that of every stranger of note, offered to his brilliant, generous-souled, noble-minded Jewish wife, Lady Rock understood that a few vulgar objections, stereotyped platitudes, or harsh commonplaces on her part could have but little influence with a man, who could call up the liberal argument of abundant fact on his side to silence them. 'Why even here, shamefully as the Jews are treated, it is impossible to refuse them recognition,' he said. 'Ignatieff is supposed to be of Jewish origin, and the princely house of Bagration claims direct descent from King David. Castelar in Spain, Gambetta in France, Minghetti in Italy, and Beaconsfield in England, are not men, my dear aunt, whom after historians will be likely to ignore. If you do not know that Benevolence, no truer friend than Sir Moses Montefiore, as much the benefactor of Christians as of his own race, it is that you do not care to know such things. The Jews of Germany sent a munificent subscription to the Cologne Cathedral Restoration Fund, and the late Baron A.

Oppenheim left fifty thousand thaler to be equally divided between the Christian and the Jewish poor.'

After wrangling with him for weeks, Lady Rockminster suddenly changed front. She dropped the subject of his infatuation altogether, and to Lord Adamant's intense relief announced her intention of going home.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

‘ERCLES’ VEIN.’

ESTHER RODOSTAMOS was seated in the pretty morning room where we have already seen her. Fräulein Fest had gone to sleep over her knitting. The heiress, notwithstanding her gay spirits, was oppressed. A heavy cloud hung over the political horizon, and her keen and sensitive spirit saw, in anticipation, troublous times coming for the unhappy people whose martyrdom, patiently endured for centuries, is not yet counted, by prejudiced Christendom, to have expiated the error of their remote ancestry. Chelanska had again been cruelly insulted, in another quarter of the town, and Esther’s prophetic soul, revealed to her pensive mood, no more than the wanton outrages and brutal persecutions of a later date were destined to fully verify and confirm.

A sound as of many tongues, dispute,

appeal, a polyglot hubbub reached her from the corridor, and before her fears had time to take form, the door was pushed open and a short, stout person, clothed in rusty black, her garments fashioned after a bygone mode, her features strongly marked and flushed with indignation, her bonnet considerably awry, stood before her.

In a moment Esther recognised the eccentric English woman, whose uncouth manners and shabby costume had been the subject of so much St. Petersburg gossip and ridicule.

'Lady Rockminster, I am sure! I am so sorry,' Esther began at once, 'my people do not understand English. A card would have explained all things, and saved you much annoyance. Pray excuse whatever may have been amiss in your reception.'

Lady Rockminster stared. 'How do you know who I am?' she said.

Esther smiled. How should she not know? But she only said, very sweetly and prettily, with her quaint little English accent, 'I think, I am sure, that you are Lady Rockminster.'

As Lady Rock despired French, the language in which Esther had first addressed her, and had never heard the expression

‘*mes gens*,’—‘my people,’ had been taken by her to signify that Hebrew race which she so heartily despised.

‘If your people don’t know English, how come you to speak it so well?’ she asked.

And Esther, all unsuspecting : ‘Oh, because, you see, I am educated, and they are not. My dear father was very particular on that point.’

A rabble horde of greasy, ill-fed, hook-nosed, ringleter, tribal dependents in the background, filled poor Lady Rock’s mental orbit of vision. In fancy she beheld them, with appalling distinctness, winding away in alexandrine length from Dan to Beersheba, and thence *viâ* Jerusalem and the Red Sea to Houndsditch and Whitechapel, with Peveril Park, like a city of refuge in the dim distance, and Matlock House, by the machinations of the oriental enchantress, turned into a sort of monumental Hebrew hospital for the remnant of the ten tribes tired of travelling. The thing must be looked to !

‘I dare say you wonder why I’ve come.’

As she said the words she felt, rather than thought, that even a journey to St. Petersburg might not, to some romantic fools, seem vain, with the prospect of Esther’s welcome, at the

end of it. The girl's rare and radiant loveliness was a revelation to the selfish, rude old woman.

'I am very glad that you have been so kind as to come. I hope you will like us, though I'm afraid the climate chills favourable impressions. I know Lord Dovedale, and any friend of his must be welcome to me,' Esther answered, with gentle hospitality.

'That's just what I've called about. Since he is determined to marry you, and no one can help it, why do you talk all this stuff about your origin? They told me no one would guess it; and now I've seen you, I can vouch for the truth of that to the Marquis. You've no right to do it; to humiliate Dovedale and lower yourself. Promise me not to bring all the tribe of poor relations you call "my people" (*mes gens*) over with you. I'm told that Jews always stick together, and the poorest man is not shaken off by the richest. Leave all your old connections behind you, and I will drop my objections, and tell the Marquis plainly that I am on your side, ready to introduce you at Court, and to the County.'

Esther, perfectly understanding the words, yet bewildered at the old woman's audacity, could only stare in incredulous silence.

‘After all, riches and beauty count for something; and, as your name tells no tales, no one need know a word about it; though, for the matter of that, Dovedale tells me a score of the people most courted in Society have Jewish blood in their veins; and an ambitious little lord, who looks to be premier, had just married a Jewess. It was not so in my time, and I still think we ought to keep the thing a secret amongst ourselves, and no one be a bit the wiser. Dovedale has duties at home which he ought not to neglect; and if you, my dear, will only promise what I ask, I will do my best to smooth matters over with his father.’

‘You are mistaken, Madam,’ Esther answered, blushing up to her eyes, and struggling hard to keep down her rising anger, ‘although Lord Dovedale, both as Lord George Peveril, and since he has succeeded to what I am told is a more important title, has done me the honour to ask me to be his wife——’

‘It is to your credit that you showed a very proper and becoming diffidence——’

‘Excuse me, Madam, we have not come to that yet—did me the honour to ask me to be

his wife, I at once declined. That being so, and since I shall never alter my determination, I perhaps do not need to answer what does not apply to the situation. Had I been able to love your nephew I should have married him. If his relations had received me ill, I should have regretted it more on his account than on my own; but I should have married him all the same, and I should never have denied my mother or my race——'

'Is your father nothing? Don't you bear your father's name? and doesn't that count?'

'——Or my mother's poor, persecuted, and unhappy race,' Esther continued, not noticing the interruption. 'I will marry no man who is ashamed of me, because the blood in my veins is Jewish blood, and I should despise and think him a poor and mean-spirited creature, weak and unmanly, who could stoop to suppress facts or impose conditions on me, in compliance with a vulgar, ignorant, and ridiculous prejudice.'

'No one would take you for a Jewess. And with your immense fortune you doubtless are justified in looking for rank and position,' pleaded Lady Rock, interrupting Esther's protest.

‘My fortune shall never buy me a title, Madam. It can be better employed in rescuing the sick, the poor, and the ignorant of my own and other races. My position is so exactly suited to me that I do not care to change it, even for the companionship of so modest, true, and kindly a gentleman as I recognise in Lord Dovedale.’

‘Very proper, so long as you had not our approval.’

‘Excuse me, but your approval had nothing whatever to do with it, nor can have. But——’ and Esther with one of those sudden transitions which her friends thought so charming, changed her tone. ‘Why should I trouble you with these heroics? We need not be ill-friends because you, living in your little corner of the earth, surrounded with old-world and exploded, if respectable, traditions, and by people who are both ignorant and afraid to contradict you, can only see things according to your little, local, limited lights. I don’t want to—I don’t mean to—marry Lord Dovedale, and that is enough, or ought to be, to win at least your toleration. I am not angry with you, or at least I will not be angry any longer. It is not your fault if you think the mushroom

racés of yesterday of great importance. My people were the Ancients of the Earth long before the great upheaval which broke your little crumb of mould off the corner of a continent, and when, for aught I know, the Peverils were nothing but jelly-fish,' Esther cried, with a laugh that was half-apologetic, half-defiant. 'But where,' she went on, 'in the history of other races, can you find such noble records of warriors, prophets, priests and kings as amongst my favoured race? Is it any wonder, when you come to think of it, that I am proud of the lovely lives our poets have painted for us? Is not the Royal singer crowned Minstrel-King for ever, whose songs have outsung the lays of your mediæval troubadours, now perished and of no effect? And are not David's psalms as sweet to-day as when he soothed Saul's troubled spirit, as sacred and as solemn as they have been throughout immemorial ages? What women, ancient or modern, can compare with the lovely, dignified, and yet lovable house-mother of the Proverbs? The exquisite idyll of Ruth amongst the corn, and the close comfort of her words to Naomi, have been the model of the later poets, and of many a loving woman's

heart since then ; but none have touched the tender grace of the Hebrew gleaner with her firm fidelity, her strong, unswerving, simple love and truth ? Is there a passion or emotion of our common daily life that does not find its counterpart in the Book of Books ? What words are “familiar in our mouths as household words,” like the words of the Bible ? I have heard Englishmen say it would not have greatly mattered to mankind if no other books had ever been written than the Bible and Shakspeare. Even they put their Shakspeare, the World-poet, second ; and how should any woman, inheriting so glorious a birthright, renounce it for the sake of a paltry title, conferred by a petty king of yesterday, or deny her race, a race which has given the world not a book, but The Book ; not a king, but The King, in order to flatter a mean prejudice or a modern prevention ? ’

In the hurry of her enthusiasm Esther had not paused to consider how much of this might be palatable or even intelligible to her visitor.

The eloquent, indignant tears were in her eyes, and, carried away by her excited feelings, she again unconsciously changed her note, this time to a minor key, full of a sudden pathos

that was, in itself, not unlike that plaint, sung by Jewish men and maidens thousands of years ago by the waters of Babylon, to the captors who required of them a song in their heaviness.

‘ Shall I forsake and deny my race because it is poor, despised, outcast? Is it for me to forget what the World owes it, in favour of races to whom it owes comparatively nothing? My father, an orthodox Greek, had me baptised in the faith of his fathers, but the blood of my mother runs warm in my veins, and beats strong at my heart, and rises up in protest against oppression and wrong. The Jewish nation gave to you your Saviour. Your model of all that is pure, and fair, and holy in womanhood is the Jewish Maiden-Mother and, in a lesser degree, the three Maries, pictured in almost every painting of Christian art for centuries past. The Roman Emperors and early writers looked on the Christians as a sort of sectarian Jews, and they were right. The Church of the present day is to primitive Christianity what the primitive Christians were to the Jews. In the Epistles you read of the charities and good works of noble Jewish ladies, of the conversion of their husbands and children. Can there be a greater marvel than

this, that the cold, Puritanical, western peoples place these Oriental Books, once only in the hands of priests and doctors learned in the Jewish law, in those of every child, no matter how tender its age, how unripe its moral understanding, or how unfitted to grasp and interpret the marvels therein contained; yet inconsistently teach that child practically to hate and despise the race of which its Saviour was born? The race of Him whose very advent it is your boast proclaimed a gospel of peace on earth and the glad tidings of good-will to man! If ever I have children,' cried the girl, rising from her seat, and holding her hand aloft in witness of the undertaking, 'far from hiding my descent from them, I will teach them all its import; I will make them proud to bear an honour which it yet behoves them to support modestly, seeing how great the facts, how humble the individual!' And, out of breath, she sank into her seat, looking the generous defiance she fancied she had not spoken.

'Tell your housekeeper to ring for my carriage,' said Lady Rockminster, nodding her head in the direction of Fräulein Fest, who sat staring with stolid astonishment at her excited *protégée*.

For the first time in her life Lady Rock recognised that she was conquered. 'Ercles' vein' was quenched with a vengeance by the peremptory request, and the overstrung girl saw in a moment all the comicality of the scene, all its temerity and possible impertinence, all the absurdity and futility of her tirade. Her sense of humour cleared the air.

'Now you will go away thinking me a mad-creature and a boor,' she said laughing, and laying her hand caressingly on Lady Rock's shrivelled black glove, 'as well as hating me for being a Jewess. No! you must forgive me, and say that you forgive me before I can let you go. I am not so bad as I seem. There are excuses for me if you only knew them. Let me try to redeem my character! Fräulein Fest (she is not my housekeeper but my dear friend and kind duenna) will give us some tea, and you must let me do something, though I can't think what it can be, to expiate my sins. Will you come and see my winter garden? Do you care for music? Shall I sing you some Russian national airs? They are so plaintive, so calm and resigned, so full of a sort of hopeless tenderness, that they exorcise all demons of pride and rebellion,

and make one feel as good as a little child who has been naughty and is forgiven, and once more at rest in its mother's arms.'

And thus prattling, and coaxing, and playfully pleading for forgiveness, Esther completely won her way into the grim old woman's heart. She sang for her, showed her the house and conservatories, undraped the famous picture for her, brought her a fragrant cup of *Joltoi Chai*, or caravan tea, with her own pretty hands, gathered a bouquet for her; and, in a word, fairly fascinated and subdued her quondam enemy.

All her aggressiveness charmed out of her, Lady Rockminster stepped meekly into one of Esther's carriages (the Embassy vehicle, getting tired of waiting, had unceremoniously departed), and was driven back in silence to her own quarters.

'Good-bye, and God bless you my dear,' she said, utterly conquered. 'I wish you could have made up your mind to take Dovedale.'

'The blemish of birth notwithstanding?'

'You must forget all that. Perhaps even now you may change your mind. Think of it.'

'No. Lord Dovedale deserves a better fate, and you a better niece.'

‘There is none better.’

And so, strangely softened and subdued, the grim old woman was whirled away into the darkness.

Lord Dovedale was both interested and curious when the fact of his aunt’s clandestine visit transpired. Both ladies were very reticent on the subject, Esther referring him to Lady Rock for information.

‘Isn’t she lovely, Aunt?’ asked the infatuated lover.

‘As an angel,’ answered Lady Rock, staring at him. ‘And ——,’ slowly, ‘mad as a March hare!’

‘And so clever! and as good as she’s beautiful.’

‘What I call utterly blasphemous! She almost gave me to understand that, without her, the New Testament would never have got itself written, and she said the Peverils were nothing but jelly-fish at a time when kings had reigned in Israel for thousands of years!’

So much for the gloss of an unprejudiced Commentator!

‘I am afraid she must think me a terrible vixen,’ Esther said, smiling, when Lord Dovedale repeated all Lady Rock’s compliments to

her. ‘But she enraged me by pre-supposing designs on my part, and then by suggesting I should creep into that fold of supreme shelter, the British Peerage, by some back way!’ She blushed crimson as she spoke; but if Lord Dovedale would not take ‘No’ for an answer, there was no good in blinking the question.

‘It is because I stand on neutral ground,’ she went on, ‘that I feel at liberty to plead the cause of a despised people. It may be true, as one of your own poets—or rather one of more liberal race—has said, that “the dead nations never rise again!” but surely it is time that persecution ceased. When I think of the centuries of Christian hate, that have driven these Ishmaels and Hagars of mankind over land and sea, when I remember the Ghettos and Juden-Strassen of Europe, and how Christian feet spurned every accursed Mordecai, and the Ages shouted the “Anathema Maran-atha” from the amphitheatre of the Cæsars, to the “Vade retro” of mediæval centuries of Papal Excommunication; when I think of the Roman races where horses, asses, buffaloes, and Jews were forced to run; the outcast Israelite naked, with a rope round his neck and a cloth round his loins, whilst Popes

and noble ladies looked on and laughed, and the populace applauded to see the ignominy that lent such piquancy to "a Roman holiday," I feel that there would be baseness unspeakable in denying the blood that runs warm in my veins !'

For all reply, Lord Dovedale stooped and kissed her hand.

CHAPTER XL.

‘THE STILL SMALL VOICE.’

THE gloom that lay brooding over the ice-bound city was dispelled by such an illumination as lit up Europe from north to south, from east to west, by its lurid and portentous glare.

The cold had been long, black, and bitter. The illness that had plucked at the purple skirts of a phantasmagoric empire, and had rolled the crown from a head laid low, kept its grip upon the Imperial sufferer, as though with a jealous reluctance to sign and seal the order for release, and hand it over to ‘The Shadow cloaked from head to foot,’ whose ghastly footsteps haunted the palace corridors, hid behind the hangings of those inner chambers, peeped through cracks and crevices, and yet had to bide its time ere it could be finally proclaimed Conqueror and King.

Ghastly whispers went the round of some impending disaster; horrible words, spoken

with bated breath, with backward glances, and half-formulated suggestions, that muttered in the closet would be counted high treason, and proclaimed on the housetops must surely have cost the imprudent herald his head.

Rumour reported the Royal and Imperial recluse long since dead, and asserted that Her faithless spouse, tormented by a thousand vague fears, no longer dared to sleep in his bed at night ; that a waxen effigy laid on the Imperial couch was ministered to, in horrible dumb-show, the counterfeit presentment of dead-and-gone Majesty, deceiving none but the baser and more ignorant sort of those employed about the Empress's apartments.

It was said that the courtiers, divining in their master the morbid fear of death, added to the natural shrinking of humanity from the finality of the event, had invented this subtle method of flattering their Sovereign's weakness ; and that by an unspoken convention, day by day, the fiction of the diurnal visit (which the enthralling charms of a new toy had for a time interrupted), was renewed and carried on, questions asked, and suggestions made, by the attendant physicians, playing out the ghastly comedy of death to its last act.

Report declared that the midnight obsequies had taken place in secret, no pomp or circumstance (as is the wont when Kings and Queens put off their ermine, and resign the crown and sceptre of their State), attending the maimed rites. The necessary certificate, the official report, conveyed to the chamber of the secret archives, would be enough to tell later inquirers that the dust beneath the chapel altar was indeed that of the mother of the reigning line, and more than this was not needed.

And it was no wonder, said the apologists, if secrecy enveloped the matter.

Mourning, court-mourning, town-mourning, the trapping of official woe, could not come at a more inopportune period. The country, distracted with internal rebellion, bleeding from a hundred wounds received in recent wars, weeping tears of blood for the holocausts of needlessly slain, was in no condition to suffer the superimposed strain of gratuitous grief.

National mourning the land was indeed already called upon to suffer; but that of a nature not expressed by the outward trapping of ostensible woe. The mourning was rather for its reproach amongst the nations, for its retrospect of failure, for the often-delayed pro-

mises, kept to the ear and broken to the heart ; for gallant sons dead on distant plains, the victims of national arrogance and incompetent folly.

Bleeding at every pore, choked with grief and tears, prone in the dust, a great nation humbled to the very ground, the rulers of the people, it was said, felt that this present was no time for making broad the ornamental phylacteries of a fictitious woe, or insulting the broken hearts of a much-enduring, faithful, patient population with the mere Pageantry of grief.

If, indeed, that pale ghost, vanished into Shadow-land, had silently taken flight, Heaven was richer by a saint the more, and earth none the poorer because of a sorrowing woman the less !

The Unseen, reacting on imaginations sated with reality, assumes undue proportions in the superstitious mind ; and the poorer populations, who had been wont to associate the name of the dying recluse with works of mercy, and upon whose submissive lips, prayers for their sovereign rulers took the form of divine honours paid (as of worship to the very gods themselves), had come so to confound the saintly

person of the Sovereign with the Unapproachable, that the Empress-saint shared, in their imaginations, on equal terms the bliss and rule of Heaven with the blessed Virgin herself.

On one side of the Winter Palace the first Lady of the Land lay, painfully gasping out the remnant of a painful life, whilst within the *enceinte* of the same building and under the same roof, the husband of her youth, the father of her children, subjugated by some subtle enchantment, let his days slip past unredeemed, deaf to the cries and prayers of his unhappy people.

Not wicked, but weak ; not evil-minded, but vacillating, seeing the Good, but consenting to the Evil ; promising to-day, procrastinating to-morrow, swayed by the stronger wills of those about him to acts of harshness opposed to his own nature. Thwarted by his heir ; disgraced by relatives, whose conduct (a by-word and a reproach) had destroyed his lingering faith in the integrity of humanity at large ; world-weary, hopeless, without energy ; unable to stop short, to break, to take the initiative, and begin again upon another plan with what He most enjoyed ; contented least, envying, amongst his brother monarchs ‘this

man's art' to govern, 'that man's scope' to foresee, the monarch of the millions, yet a broken-hearted, disappointed, hopeless Being, witnessing, in his own person, the death and destruction of those liberal ideas which had illustrated his Prime and flattered the hopes of his people, in the generous promise of his Youth.

As we know, the Empress was not yet dead.

By what means (probably by none other than those of their common faith, to which, having been forced to conform on her marriage, the dying Lady was devoted), pledges had been exacted from Helena Perowska which must affect her whole future life, no one but herself knew. Vows imposed by the dying upon the soul of another are of all vows the most binding. Morally they may be unjustifiable. Reason may be convinced by arguments used against them ; and yet the sensitive conscience cannot bring itself to acknowledge them null and void, or to break its pledged word to the dead.

Loyalty to the dead outweighs the logic of the living, and it is well that it should be so. For those whom we have lost, we can now do

nothing but keep implicit faith with them. If we are faithless to the living, we are punished, if not by Conscience, yet, in that we go in fear of discovery—any moment, any chance may reveal our defection; and reproach, and scorn, and loss of love and esteem, bring the enormity of our mean faithlessness home to us.

But disloyalty to the dead has a deeper smart and a keener reproach, though it be only our own consciences that accuse us. They, the holders of our broken promises, or our forsaken faith, are as the dumb, in whose mouths are found no reproach. They mutely gaze at us across the gulf with wide and wistful eyes, and out of the Eternal Silences make no sign. If we have wronged them, borne false witness to them by word or deed, been faithless and forgetful,—to whom may we not be false and faithless? And how shall the living put trust in one who is disloyal to the dead?

Mellin, forced by Bianca's attitude into unwilling contact, had used her as an emissary on more than one occasion requiring skilful treatment at the Winter Palace. The Countess Perowska's visits to the dying Lady made it only natural that her companion should accompany

her. Persons and things must be tested, times and seasons accurately noted, the required information be so skilfully acquired as to seem the natural result of gossip, rather than the crux upon which mighty events hung.

Waiting for hours in the Countess's sledge, the confines of the courtyard grew irksome to Bianca.

In this vast Winter Palace tradition asserted six thousand human beings were housed, to say nothing of flocks of sheep and herds of kine. The cellars swarmed, the lofts were populated, and it seemed nobody's business to question the self-arrogated privilege of many of the incongruous dwellers beneath the Imperial roof.

Stories were told of the burning down of the Palace, and typical of the iron will of the Czar Nicholas was the anecdote of his commands that the new Palace should be rebuilt within a year. He was respectfully informed that such a *tour de force* was a human impossibility. His answer, 'It must be done!' set thousands of workmen on their mettle. But as the cruel cold increased, the bricklayers cried that the mortar would not mix, the moisture froze before it could be absorbed. Huge fires were lighted, and night and day the myriad

horde laboured at their task. Just as it was completed, the roof of the vast reception-hall fell in, and crushed all heart out of the work-people physically and morally. An official communicated the disaster to the Emperor. 'Let it be remedied' was his reply. And—so much for the force of will—the new Winter Palace stood on the site of the old, within the year prescribed by Imperial decree.

This and similar anecdotes ran through Bianca's mind as she looked up at the suite of rooms in one of which the 'icy-hearted Muscovite' breathed his last. There she had been shown the common Persian rug, the worn-out slippers, in use, as the custodian said, twenty-eight years; there his grey military cloak lies folded on the hard camp bed upon which he died. His sword and helmet are where he left them. On the table is the report of the Quarter-Master-General, delivered to the Emperor on the morning of the day on which he expired. A grenadier of the Golden Guard of the Palace, always on duty over these relics of the 'never-to-be-forgotten Tsar,' points to the window, across which He gazed in the supreme moment of heart-broken defeat at the frozen Neva, the Isaac Bridge, the gilded dome

of the Isaac Church, away towards his port of Cronstadt, and knew,—like an antique hero,—that this was the fitting moment for him to die!

Bianca remembered to have read in the journal of a great Queen how, when the splendid Autocrat visited Windsor, impressing everybody by his noble, manly beauty, and serene, dominant manner, he brought in his personal habits the simplicity of the camp, into kings' palaces with him; and the first thing his valets did, on being shown his bedroom at Windsor Castle, was to send to the stable for some trusses of clean straw, in order to fill the leathern case which formed a mattress for the little camp bed on which he slept, and on which, thirteen years later, he—the vanquished foe of his then Hostess—drawing his military cloak across his eyes, in the anguish which a proud spirit suffers in the bitter hour of supreme defeat, turned his face to the wall—to die!

In her wanderings, Bianca made more than one acquaintance, standing idly, talking with anyone who came in her way; asking trivial questions, sometimes of servants, workpeople, even cooks and confectioners; the children coming and going, a stray dog, a bird, a *dvornik*, or herdsman giving the text for what

might seem gossip, chatter, of the most futile and desultory.

Bianca was elate. The sense of responsibility, the self-importance, the excitement, the pride as of a trust reposed in her, gave a light to her eyes, a joy to her countenance, a spirit to her step, that had been sadly absent of late. 'I do not understand—I love,' was the *motif* running through the symphony. She lived, and was contented to live, entirely in the present. She rested in the sufficiency of the day, and acknowledged, what seemed to her, the goodness thereof.

As for Mellin, his prejudice deepened and widened. A chance word of banter let fall by the Countess, a sly allusion of Julie Kerezoff's, repeating the idle gossip of a passing hour, made Bianca's presence unspeakably distasteful to him. How had she managed to thrust herself into his councils, and become one of his implements? He confessed it was a concession, and he feared that—like all concessions—it was a compromise which pledged him to more than was apparent. To him, a man whose initial articles of faith declare that the brethren must be 'resigned beforehand to torture and death; must have no personal affairs, nor

interests, nor feelings, nor private property; must be prepared to die, or send to death, to devote and to destroy, without prejudice or favour, be it himself, his family, his friends or his enemies, so it were for the good of coming generations,' such a man must necessarily condemn all personal scruples as petty, false, and against the spirit of the code to which he subscribes.

Bianca must be got rid of. Quietly, in such a way as to excite no suspicion, yet so as to remove a stumbling-block of offence from his path, so as to reassure his mind, and save 'the Cause' from danger of betrayal at her inconsequent hands. Why was she here? Why had he been persuaded, against his better judgment, to affiliate her to 'the Order?' Why should he run the risk, which he felt to be imminent, of her imprudence, folly, and impulsiveness? She had come to weigh upon him like an incubus. He hated her with an irrational hatred, and hated her doubly for the hatred she inspired. He felt that he was ever on the brink of being made ridiculous by this little raw English schoolgirl. And, in his darker moods of vexation and impatience, he told himself he was a fool for suffering scruples to obtain

in her case which in any other he would dismiss as superfluous and imbecile.

Thus he had arrived at a determination. To-day, a few hours hence, and the matter would have passed out of his control, and be for ever set at rest. Had not hundreds of women perished in the attempt to change the Unchangeable? What was one life out of millions? What if she were a stranger? Hospitality ceases to be appropriate in a household. Brothers and sisters take their chances of good and evil alike, and make no apology. What if she were too young, too unripe of judgment, to know her own mind? Bah! sages, hoary-headed men, had arrived at the same result. Her youth had been passed under influences far other than the present; those associations had been to her like ropes of sand, or chains of water. No! the martyrs to a cause are, after all, the *élite* of that cause; and the canonised of all kalendars are envied by their obscurer brethren. Scruple? Conscience? Self-reproach? Bah! well enough for feeble drivellers, fit for old women's tales.

His pen had signed and sealed Bianca's fate.

As he laid it down, he told himself that he envied her, so soon, and so well, out of the

hurly-burly. What had she done to deserve this 'happy despatch?' No more toil and trouble. Rest and the Consummation, conventionally supposed, to be devoutly wished for.

His musings and melancholy were disturbed by Julie Kerezoff. An involuntary exclamation of impatience broke from him, his coveted few minutes of rest hopelessly wrecked before his eyes.

She saw the gesture and divined his mood. There was a tacit coolness between the two. Both knew and felt it. 'She would not keep him a moment,' she said; 'but would he see the Countess alone, and explain to her what Julie herself could not? A letter from Hero Martello had come to her, enclosing one to Bianca. Mr. Owen was dead, and the mother feared the effect of the news upon her impulsive, excitable child. She, Hero, knew no one in St. Petersburg but Julie de Kerezoff, or she would not have taken the liberty; but for her child's sake, &c. &c. &c.'

'She knew me,' said Mellin gruffly.

In fancy he saw her, beautiful and full of grace, at the Marquis of Matlock's *soirée*, singing like an angel, the flattered guest of the *dilettante*

peer. He saw her leaning above the parapet at Sprudelheim, uttering those vague, melancholy words, full of mysterious yearnings and unutterable pity, over the vast army of toiling and suffering Humanity. He saw her as she bade him farewell, putting her hand into his, after the loyal English fashion, unsuspicious, frank, friendly. She did not guess that his wild doctrines were already estranging her child from her; that rebellion, like a grain of mustard seed, sown in a young, passionate, undisciplined nature, would soon grow to a vast poisonous tree, casting a chill shade upon the love and trust that had borne such bright blossoms hitherto. And here he was murdering her child! Devoting her daughter to death; mercilessly, without scruple or hesitation, sentencing the mother to life-long solitude and never-ending regret. A groan as of remorse involuntarily broke from his lips.

‘You are bored,’ said Julie. ‘It is wearisome, I know; of course, if you absolutely cannot, I must.’

‘It is well, Julie Petrovna—go—go,’ he said, and pointed to the door.

‘I go, Serge Constantinovitch,’ she answered, and closed the door behind her.

The early afternoon was waning. The painful labour of his day was lost.

All he had written must be cancelled, destroyed. An hour later the document would have passed into other hands, and Bianca would have gone to her destruction. One chance in a hundred might save her; but on that one remote chance he dared no longer rest. Quick, with pen and ink, to repair the wrong. One brief peremptory note to the girl herself, requiring her immediate presence. A line to the Countess, appointing an hour to see her at her own home, and then the weariful minute instructions to be conveyed to ‘Primus,’ the Head of the secret Executive. As he wrote, the vision of Hero by her widowed, childless, fatherless hearth, rose up between him and the paper, and smote him with reproach.

The gaze of those large, sorrowful, pathetic eyes looking upwards at him was almost more than he could bear. He passed his hand rapidly across his eyes, and wrote on at the eleventh hour. All made ready, every detail recorded, every contingency provided against, with a sense as of narrow escape from irrevocable disaster, he heaved a sigh of unconscious

relief, and threw himself back in his chair, mentally and morally exhausted.

Silence, profound, immense, portentous, reigned around. Bianca could not be here at present. So much the better; it would give him time to think. Grotesque ideas of Bianca's letter never being delivered to her, her address being beyond postal communication, grew and gathered, importuning his tired brain. She and her grandfather comparing notes about defective postal arrangements, and telling each other the news, Hero's letter had been intended to convey. The memory of his own father's death; the mounted messenger galloping over miles of frozen snow to bring him a boy from school, to the father's bedside. His oath, the legacy of woe and hate that had been his grim inheritance; the strangeness of his lonely life, unillumined by any of the softer affections growing out of love, marriage, the family, home.

Night had fallen—the early northern night. The city slumbered in profound calm. Mellin, in a sort of trance, sat on undisturbed, dreaming as it were in a state of semi-conscious abstraction.

The sound of voices, hurried footsteps, and

Bianca's face upon the threshold. A moment, and the well-trained servant had closed the door, and disappeared again.

He rose but made no step forward to meet her.

'You sent for me?' she said, coming up to his chair, 'you sent for me?' There was eager inquiry in her eyes as in her voice.

'I did.'

'What for? Is anything amiss? I cannot have missed the signal for I never stirred, and I should have waited where you told me for ever and ever. I thought you had forgotten me.'

He continued to look at her scrutinisingly, with some odd speculative inquiry in his gaze that she was at a loss to decipher. He was wondering whether this arbitrary act of his were not a mistake, whether it had not been better to let things take their course? He told himself that he had secured the future torment of some good man's life; he wondered, uneasily, in what way the preordained march of events would wreak the Nemesis of non-fulfilment? He wondered if she would have been much disfigured or easily recognisable? He said to her, in unspoken words, 'You are

your own ghost though you don't know it.' Some extravagant idea that Hero owed to him her child's life, and possibly all the future comfort, but more probably all the future misery of her own, these, and a hundred such wildly foolish fancies, kept him speechless. In some preposterous way he was henceforth the girl's father, her providence; he had given her her life a second time of forethought and will prepense; positively, not negatively, as her first life had been given, a mere chance, a freak of fate or Destiny.

'What is it?' Bianca asked timidly, alarmed, anxious, disquieted. Why did he look at her so oddly? Why did he not speak?

But almost before he could answer she had fallen on her knees, flinging her arms wildly around him where he stood.

'My God! my God! save me,' she shrieked, hiding her face in an agony of terror, as she clasped his knees and clung to him for protection and support.

Mellin stood erect. A strange pallor overspread his countenance.

He was silent.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE CRACK OF DOOM.

No soothing words, no caressing touch reassured the clinging girl. The fearful explosion, rending and tearing the air, had produced a detonation of the atmosphere unlike anything within his own immediate experience: then all was still.

The shock and terror of surprise had paralysed Bianca's tongue. It clave to the roof of her mouth. After her first wild, involuntary appeal she too had been silent, waiting for what might come. She hid her face and trembled. This, surely was the 'crack of Doom!' 'when the heavens shall be rolled together like a scroll,' and the order of the Universe confounded.

This was what Mellin had been waiting for; this it was that had disturbed his usually calm faculties and excited him in a manner wholly foreign to his nature.

Yet even he could not, at a distance, measure the exact, or even the probable, extent of mischief involved in the reverberating ruin; even he who had planned, could not calculate the event. Destiny might as yet but be half accomplished; a recurrence of that extraordinary concussion of the atmosphere, crackling the very air, like some vast convulsion of nature, like the upheaval of primeval rocks or the crash of mighty mountains toppling to ruin, might yet take place.

He waited.

Then, when no second shock followed the first air-quake, he assumed that they had for the present heard so far the conclusion of the whole matter. He smiled to think that the explosion which had terrified a little girl in a back-room of St. Petersburg would reverberate to the remotest corners of the Globe, teaching rulers timely wisdom, warning alike Sovereigns and Peoples of a day of final retribution after many days of unheeded warning.

Lost in his own thoughts, he forgot the girl at his feet. Swift-footed messengers must be even now speeding on their portentous way with the details of death and destruction.

Bianca took courage and looked up.

‘What was it?’ she asked, in a terrified whisper, her lips pale, every nerve trembling with excitement.

‘It was the tocsin of Liberty!’ Mellin answered, a cold steely light glittering in his pale blue eyes. ‘It was the knell of Tyranny! But get up now, for I have to speak to you.’ It would be well, he thought, that the messenger should find him alone.

‘But—what else was it?’ she asked timidly, yet persistently. Somehow she took it for granted that Mellin knew. She did not think or reason, but instinct, unconsciously guided by his manner, led her to a right conclusion.

‘What was it?’

‘What was it?—well—whatever else it was, or may prove to be, it *was*—your death-knell!’ he answered with cruel candour.

But Bianca’s mind, shaken by this new and awful experience, was in no condition to grasp his meaning. She asked him again, with the persistency of a curious child.

‘What was it?’

And, with brutal frankness, he told her the truth. ‘You complained that you were not employed, that even the humblest of the brethren were of more use, that even in Eng-

land you were able to do more. This—this, as to which you question me, would have been your mission. The unconscious messenger who brought you my note an hour earlier had other instructions. It would not have been your hand that would have cast the actual die of doom, but it would have passed through your hands to the last agent ; indirectly it would have been you, that compassed Fate and inaugurated Change.'

She looked at him eagerly, her eyes dilating, her form expanding, her attitude one of inspiration and rapt attention.

He had elevated her to his confidence ; she was held worthy to share actively with him in the regeneration of his country, to open the gates of Liberty to the waiting peoples who had knocked at the iron gates clamorously so often in vain ; she was his delegate, his chosen instrument, his equal, his trusted agent, his companion, worthy to speed his plans, to carry out his daring projects. She could see no cruelty in it ; she would have despised any hesitation ; she was as much in earnest in her wild enthusiasm and hero-worship, in her courage and inspiration, as Joan of Arc or the Maid of Saragossa. Hers was the spirit which

leaps into the breach, fires a train, scales a battlement, blows up the ship, leads a forlorn hope without a second's hesitation, without a thought of self. A strange sense of pride and elation filled her. Her veins ran fire, her eyes sparkled, and with parted lips and bated breath, she hung upon his very words.

‘And why was I robbed of this?’ she asked. She addressed him as an equal. She required an explanation of him. Where he had placed her, there she, of right, remained; accident could not affect that fact.

‘Why?’ he repeated, and frowned at her dominant attitude.

His weakness, the vision of his one ideal, impossible Love, widowed ere her prime, seated in solitude by her lonely hearth, the ashes of her childless, loveless life at her feet, were not reasons to give this Spartan girl. The unwonted tenderness which the mental picture of Hero's loneliness had called up must not be revealed. A commonplace answer must be found; the more matter of fact the better.

‘Because I had a letter to deliver to you,’ he said shortly, ‘and I had no right to keep you in ignorance of its contents. If it could be delivered even at the eleventh hour it ought

to be. And having said so much I must leave you, for there are those who need me, and who are wondering now at my absence. I will send the Countess's carriage, or failing that, the first *likhac* I meet, for you.'

And without allowing her time to reply or any more formal farewell he went out, leaving Bianca alone.

CHAPTER XLII.

‘AFTER MANY DAYS.’

By a miracle the Imperial family had been saved.

An ambassador was late ; a cousin in disgrace [who had been provided with a distant government and sent into exile with all the pomp and circumstance of viceroyalty] had, on his return, been invited to present himself, and was to dine at the Palace for the first time since his restoration to favour. The protracted illness of the first Lady in the Land reduced all receptions to semi-official dimensions, but the occasion was nevertheless felt to be one of more than usual importance. The ambassadors of two friendly States were to be present, and the head of the secret police ; and these, together with a popular general, whose views were listened to with deference, formed a select party.

The sons and daughters of the Imperial House were all assembled together.

Summoned many weeks before to what appeared to be their mother's dying bed, they remained from day to day to cheer her by their presence, feeling it impossible to leave when at any moment the gentle invalid might breathe her last.

The small reception-room in which the guests awaited the arrival of Him in whose honour they were gathered together, was one used on occasions when, being *en petit comité*, the vast public apartments would be inappropriate and uncomfortable. The assembled company would only have to pass into the next room, where at a certain signal, dinner would be served.

An air of constraint marked all present. The situation was felt to be a difficult one, and the delay caused by the Sovereign's unpunctuality, whilst it prolonged the general awkwardness, was a cause of secret irritation to more than one of the guests.

In a distant corner of the Palace a lovely young woman, whose strong white arms and finely-proportioned figure gave singular grace and charm to her attitude, was tossing a

splendid curly-headed boy at an elderly gentleman, who sometimes caught and kissed the laughing urchin, and sometimes left a tender imprint on the white hand that brushed his cheek. The grave, careworn, heavily-lined face relaxed into softness ; the fiercely bristling moustache seemed to make way for the shadow of a smile, as mother and child, exhilarated by their game of romps, flung their arms round his neck every time he attempted to rise, declaring he should not go.

‘ Tell naughty papa not to leave us ! ’

‘ Naughty papa, not leave us ! ’ and fresh kisses, and tossings, and laughter.

Well might a man give up mere pomp and pleasure for such blissful ease as this ! No wearisome questions of policy or government, no vexed theories of state, or precedent ! The buckram of official life, court ceremony and etiquette, stiff with embroideries and military glitter, below ; and here, above, a heaven of sheltered peace and love. And yet, no choice !

Escaping at last from the soft arms that embraced and bound, and the sweet kisses that silenced Him, the Ruler drew himself up, assumed his stiff military air ; the cloud, which he would gladly have banished for ever,

settled down once more upon his furrowed brow, and with an air of stern melancholy he stood amongst his guests.

Five minutes later, and a yawning chasm showed where the banqueting-table had lately stood. The dining-room, wrecked from end to end, ploughed and furrowed by the explosive, the wainscoting split like matches, the tapestry rent in strips, the plate, glass, damask furniture engulfed, shivered, ruined ; the flooring torn up, all enveloped in mysterious, sudden, irrevocable destruction, and wreckage ; and some thirty or forty victims, dead and wounded, to show how miraculous had been the escape of that family group, assembled in the neighbouring room.

Thanks to the massive masonry of Peter's Palace the outer walls had defied the worst effects of the explosion, and to all semblance remained intact. The invalid, sleeping softly in a distant chamber, had not so much as been roused from her slumbers ; and although the city was in a state of alarm and excitement, yet the prevailing sentiment was one of universal thankfulness, and the predominant impression one of wonder that so many marked lives should have been spared.

Investigation as to the cause of the explosion, which had, in the first instance, been declared accidental, proved that it was the result of a carefully-laid plot. Workpeople were suspected and interrogated; the presence of a whole army of hangers-on, dwellers amongst the rafters, inhabitants of the cellars of this vast Palace, only proved the facilities afforded to the enemies of order, and the lax economy of a household where the location of several hundred individuals was either unsuspected or disregarded, was matter for severe comment.

Details were hushed up as much as possible, and *Te Deums* were chanted in all the churches; and before the Public had ceased to speculate upon the dynamite mystery, the bells of the city were tolling the knell of Her for whom they had once pealed a merry bridal welcome.

At last, at last, that long agony was ended and that suffering soul at peace!

Not one of the thousands of poor, who blessed Her name for bounties retrieved from the lavish expenditure of idleness and folly; not one of the many sick, who, in Hospitals founded and endowed by her, had learned to pray for their Patroness; none of the ignorant rescued from the orphanage of the

streets, and taught to revere the name of their Empress; and youths clothed and fed and fostered in Homes of her institution, but availed themselves of the privilege accorded by immemorial custom to the humblest fellow-citizen, of gazing for the last time upon the face of the Empress Saint.

In the vast church, which was guarded by those who during her life had formed her body-guard, in front of the *Ikonostasis* or gilt screen, through the middle or 'Royal Door' of which the Emperor and the Archimandrite only are allowed to enter, day and night the priests and nuns kept ward and watch over the Imperial coffin. And every day, as the same hour came round, He who had been her husband, her sons, her daughter, and her personal attendants, heard masses for the repose of that soul which, here on earth, they had done so much to disquiet, so little to soothe.

Then, from six till seven, the doors were closed, and the nuns and the physicians went through the ghastly ceremony which, by a horrible paradox, is called (in other countries) 'making the toilette of the dead.' The faded flowers were replaced by fresh ones; cosmetics repaired the inroads which the day had made

on frail mortality ; the veil was disposed more becomingly ; the hand, which each humblest dweller in the city was suffered to kiss, replaced on the embroidered cushion.

Attended by Bianca, the Countess Helena Perowska had come, for the last time, to stand once more beside that lifeless form ; to renew once more those solemn vows that bound her, by strange oaths, to the dead ; to kneel once more at the feet of her Sovereign Mistress and quondam rival ; of Her whom the world might have pronounced her the enemy, but between whom and herself a mysterious secret bond existed, which nothing earthly could now unloose.

To-night the coffin would be finally closed. Even yesterday the surgeons in attendance would fain, had they dared to urge their views, have permitted the populace only to see the velvet sarcophagus in which the Empress lay.

In the dark church the monotonous murmur of the priests, *Gospodi Pomilui!* (Lord, have mercy upon us), and the ever-recurring *Amens!* of the nuns, the myriad of burning tapers, that touching emblem of the soul so striking a feature of the Greek *ritus*, the absence of all instrumental music, and the weird and ancient

melodies chanted in a minor key at distant intervals, afforded impressive evidence of the presence of Death. In an hour or two the populace would be admitted, and the vast human stream would continue to flow through the church until seven o'clock the next morning.

Kneeling on the stone pavement, close to one of the nuns who guarded the four corners of the coffin, Helena Perowska wept bitterly. The gentle Sister, who knew her well—indeed, was one of her almoners in many secret works of charity, and whose pure, secluded life permitted her to know nothing of Helena's sinful one—pushed a cushion towards the weeping lady. But she took no notice.

'Sire,' said an official, respectfully bending down to the Emperor's ear, 'if your Imperial Majesty pleases, it is the last moment.'

Instantly, with military obedience, bearing himself proudly aloft, the Emperor arose, and, with a sign to his children to follow him, came with measured step down the aisle to where, before the great altar, his silent Consort lay.

'The last moment!'

He had understood the meaning of those

words, and he was ready to fulfil the duty they implied.

‘*The last moment!*’

As he stood looking down into the coffin, a thousand recollections peopled his mind. His first meeting with his wife, in her innocent, unformed girlhood. His visit to the queer, out-at-elbows old Schloss, where her father, a ‘mediatised’ Prince, writing Royal Highness before his name, kept up a faded state, with shabby retainers and old-world courtesies, chamberlains whose keys were silver gilt, and a mistress of the robes whose elaborate struggles with the poverty of the Princess’s and her won toilettes were only equalled by the rigidity of her morals and the exactions of her code of etiquette. The betrothal; the gay and innocent surprise of his young bride at suddenly finding herself a person of vast importance, the centre of an obsequious circle. The pomp and glitter of their marriage, their slow but sure disillusionment, the birth of an heir, the renewal of kindlier sentiments, and the long, step by step, estrangement resulting in——This!

As he stood and gazed upon that gentle countenance, now glorified by Death, the truth came home to his stricken soul. He made no

plausible excuses to his conscience. In that supreme hour Self stood naked before him, and was ashamed; condemned without appeal. The servile flattery of courtiers, the paltering of a weak nature with conscience, the comfortable, convenient self-delusion, the mental indolence, irritability, and indifference of years, all fell away from him.

He stood there, looking on all that was mortal of the wife of his youth and the mother of his children, and told himself that it was all over—a miserable, self-accused, self-condemned man!

The Time which had seemed so long had vanished, and he stood face to face with Eternity. In life he had not cared for her; but now a horrible sense of loneliness fell upon him. She had been his guardian angel. For her sake his murmuring people had held their peace; to spare her last moments, retribution had been stayed. He had not meant to be wicked, he had only been weak; but now, in his remorse and anguish, he declared to himself that even to have been wicked were less fatal than the disastrous weakness which had betrayed him. He did not shuffle with the truth. To deceive himself could have brought him no comfort now. Even quite lately he had

flattered himself that, since no reproaches had ever reached him, his wife had been ignorant of, or at least indifferent to, her injuries. But plausible pretexts withered like a parchment in the fire at this supreme test, and as he stood by the bier gazing into his dead wife's face, he knew himself to be a miserable man. At the head of the coffin, where the priests continued to mumble passages from Holy Writ, stood the husband, and at the foot the son, pale with grief and weeping, with sleepless nights and unspeakable anxieties, with streaming eyes,—the outward visible sign and link of that life-union now cancelled by death. Behind the heir to the throne, and close to him on the left, were the other children of the marriage. The son banished by his father's wrath, but now recalled ; the blue-eyed, tawny-bearded Benjamin, the last-born and most dearly loved ; the young daughter whose untiring care, unflinching courage, and devoted silence, had kept her mother's moments peaceful to the last : all were assembled together at this supreme juncture to meet both parents.

In an instant, before she knew it, before possibility of escape, Helena Perowska found herself surrounded by the Imperial family.

Bianca, out of respect, or, it may be, feeling

herself out of place, had at once retired into a distant shadowy background of stone columns, where she awaited the Countess, near the door.

Helena, her face buried in her hands, utterly unconscious of, and indifferent to, the personality of those surrounding the coffin, was bathed in tears. They might be the members of her late Majesty's household—the physicians, nurses, and underlings—or even the relays of priests and nuns, who were about to relieve the guard of those who kept vigil. In any case it behoved her to leave, for she had already lingered too long.

She rose to her feet, threw back her crape veil, and was about to advance, and for the last time kiss her gentle mistress's hand, when her eyes fell full upon a group that startled her beyond expression. Instinctively she looked round for some possible means of escape. But it was too late.

Emerging from the darkness of the shadowy background, a face, pale, furrowed, tear-stained, and inexpressibly mournful looked upon her with accusatory distinctness; and eyes made wild by grief and remorse mutely met hers, like a living reproach. To the awakened conscience of the superstitious penitent, the cor-

porate presentment of his sins of unfaithfulness and selfishness at such a moment, seem nothing less than a divinely-appointed apparition. And registering a mental vow that the warnings of this silent monitress should not be disregarded, the Sovereign braced himself to his immediate task. With eyes which (as a looker-on told the writer of these lines) literally poured forth floods of tears, coursing each other rapidly through the furrows and channels of his care-lined countenance, dropping in showers on the face of his dead wife, he advanced yet a step nearer to the coffin, stooped, and kissed for the last time on earth the clay-cold forehead of his Consort. Then, weeping still, but mastering the excess of emotion, he withdrew, signing to his heir to take his last leave also of the mother he had loved.

And so, one by one, the weeping family advanced and retired, until, the last kiss given, the still weeping husband motioned to the workmen to proceed with their grim task.

As the strokes fell in dismal cadence, reverberating through the vaulted gloom, each blow sent a fresh pang of desolation and remorse through the heart of the chief mourner. Erect, disdaining to conceal his tears or hide

his weakness in the cowering attitude of despair, no soldier could have guarded his post more unflinchingly than the Imperial sentinel. The last stroke of the hammer, at length, told that the worst was over ; and, crossing himself, he withdrew.

His good angel had departed !

Helena Perowska drew her veil hastily over her face, and, shrinking into the corner of the carriage which she had gained on leaving the church, unobserved of Bianca, gave herself up to an agony of thought.

Thus she, and the Lover of her youth, had been destined to meet again !

Between the two women, between the dead and the living, between the disregarded wife and the discarded mistress, doubly disloyal and trebly faithless, self-condemned and self-denounced, the unhappy man to whom Helena had vowed all the gifts and glory of her youth, the devotion and loyalty of her womanhood, for one brief moment had stood. She, whose hand might have cast the die of destruction ; she, whose weak arm might have avenged the wrongs which had burned and eaten into her soul ; she, who, disgusted by the weakness, the pusillanimity, the delays of an irresolute and

feeble soul, had joined in the impatient cry of a patient people, 'How long, O Lord, how long?' whose soft and generous nature had been turned to gall and bitterness, whose character had received a warp which it might never wholly recover, and whose past love seemed, in the disaster of the issue, less a sin than a crime, less a blunder than a degradation—she, by some irony of Fate, was the elected shield, as hers was the protecting hand and hers the vigilant eye, appointed to warn and watch over the man whom thousands had sworn should cease to betray, and should at last learn, in his own person, the bitterness of betrayal.

But an oath to the individual could not cancel vows to 'the Cause,' to break which meant, inevitably, death to the disloyal.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A DOUBTING HEART.

WE have wandered far from that peaceful scene when the golden glory of a July evening, fell soft and warm on the lawns of Sprudelheim; and youth, and hope, and careless security seemed the enviable portion of the commonplace group of middle-class persons, with whom our story commenced.

As month after month passed by, and Hero found new duties interwoven in her daily life, she wondered at the impatience of despair with which she had declared to herself, in her first rapture of loneliness, that life must henceforth be intolerable to her.

The loss of her mother, followed by the loss of her child, the misunderstanding and estrangement that had grown out of Bianca's wilfulness and rebellion, had left her indeed a solitary and deeply unhappy woman. Her more timid

nature could not understand the rebellions of untamed youth, and to her it seemed little short of sacrilege, that Bianca should shake off the sheltering restraints of home, the safety and protection afforded by the blessed shield of an encompassing family love, for a voluntary life amongst strangers, in a strange land. Notwithstanding the natural softness and generosity of the woman, indignation was strong within her, as she considered her child's faithlessness and duplicity. To her it seemed unpardonable, unholy, unrighteous, that a child, and that child a girl, should revolt against her elders, follow her own will, and, despising all traditions of feminine duty, establish for herself independent relations with the outside world, of which, in her inexperience and precipitation, she could know nothing.

Hero herself was still too young to have done with life and its interests, prejudices, and passions; but she had ever felt—indeed, had then felt it most acutely when least able to realise privacy in her own person—that a woman's existence should be sheltered, modest, sacred to home and all its refining and dutiful precepts; and she could neither understand nor excuse the child's sudden and entire rejection

of these privileges, which in the mother's judgment were inestimable.

It was Fitz who by degrees brought Hero to see and allow for the force of inherited tendencies, the power for good or evil, of hereditary qualities and defects. 'Bianca is not, as you flattered yourself, "the child of her mother only,"' Fitz said, smiling not without significance as he wound up his apology.

'I was never so conceited or so silly as to wish that,' replied Hero; and might have added, but that tenderness and reverence kept her silent, 'how could I desire for her, any better ensample, or the reflex of a character more sweet and endearing than that, in whose immediate contact she lived, and moved, and had her being?' But reflection told her that Fitz was right—that she had made too little allowance for that warm Italian blood; had ignored too persistently, in her scheme of education, Bianca's southern temperament; and had taken it too much for granted that the girl's ardent nature would accommodate itself to the grooves into which Fate had cast it, whilst she confessed the power of circumstance, and the defect of Bianca's immediate surroundings. In a large family of boys and girls, or even in a narrower

circle, where men of the world, wholesome-minded and possessed of common sense, guide the domestic helm, Bianca's escapade would have been impossible. But in a household of women, outsiders discover an easy, if not a 'happy,' hunting-ground, and carry out their operations with a sense of facility and security, not possible where a strong masculine element prevails.

One horrible suspicion had, all along, haunted Hero's mind. She doubted if any impersonal, abstract motive would have been strong enough to overmaster all Bianca's scruples and affections, or could have drawn her, without appeal, from that filial allegiance which she had given no previous intimation of forswearing. Whilst the Mother, in Hero, shrank from ascribing motives other than those alleged, to her child, the Woman, with keener insight and quicker instinct, divined a danger which, even to herself, she blushed to confess and refused to recognise.

Of young love, Hero, by experience, and in her own person, knew nothing. She had been married, when little more than a child, to a man who quickly made it clear that love was the last thing which entered into his conjugal

calculations. In a certain sense, Hero was still virginal of soul; of an extreme and excessive sensitiveness on all matters relating to the subject of love and marriage; and she felt a positive shyness and hesitation at entering upon such a subject with a maiden of tender age, lest she should unwittingly brush the bloom off those feelings which, unless delicately handled, lose all their grace and half their beauty. With what front, with what face could she suggest the topic of love and lovers to this slender, nymph-like young creature, of whom it pleased her fancy and flattered her imagination to think as a young roe upon the mountains, an antelope, gracefully bounding from rock to rock, a dainty swan, proudly arching its white and delicate neck as it circles solitarily upon the mirrored surface which reflects its magical beauty; a folded flower; the bud whose full blossom seems yet far distant.

The outbursts of Bianca's gay young voice, as it went thrilling upwards, seemed to Hero like the notes of the lark, carolling its orisons at Heaven's gate, gaily and gladly, fearlessly and free. To her, when by chance she heard the topics of love and marriage discussed amongst young people, the modern tone seemed coarse

and callous, its outspokenness profoundly shocking. Its calm cynicism, the cool assumption that an advantageous arrangement must necessarily be the basis of all mutual understanding, the not always altogether feminine advances of the young ladies, the rude repartee and rattling reply, the snappish rejoinder and the short rebuff, the retort uncourteous and the unvarnished personalities, so often as she heard them, reminded her rather of Touchstone's recipes for the avoidance of blows, than of the intercourse of gently-bred youths with delicately-nurtured maidens.

Hero was frankly ashamed to suggest to her child that some foolish, girlish infatuation was misleading her. How attribute to her the unmaidenly attitude of seeking, where she was not sought? of offering love, where none was proffered? of creating opportunities, where none were desired? She could not do it. Neither, fortunately for both of them, could she have understood or excused that pledge whereby Bianca, in her misguided enthusiasm, had bound herself to a desperate Cause, willing to obey the stern behests and accept the awful responsibilities of a society of fanatical reformers, whilst the tender restrictions of home,

the prohibitions of a law of love, were beyond her endurance.

Take any ordinary, educated woman of the middle classes, and explain to her the tenets, the beliefs and aspirations, the codex of any group of ardent political reformers, and await the result of your best efforts at explanation. If you expect justice of her, you will be grievously disappointed. ‘Murder and Regicide’ will seem to her terms too soft for the crimes with which she credits your system, for the outrages she attributes to your scheme. Argument will not produce (when *did* argument ever produce?) conviction ; and you will go out of her presence knowing that she thinks you a brute, a ruffian, and a monster, and feeling that you have wounded a gentle soul, and estranged a kindly heart to no purpose.

She is comfortable in her Conservatism, and she assumes that her neighbours are, or ought to be, comfortable in theirs (if they are not, they must accept the inevitable exception which proves the complacent rule). Why should visionary reformers and fanatical propagandists disturb the comfortable old world, with their new-fangled theorems? From the lofty heights of her conscious virtue she looks down

in pitying condemnation (but still in condemnation) on your sins, and will mentally brand you as 'dangerous'; a disputer of precedent, a disturber of custom, a pestilent fellow.

To Hero, the aspirations and sympathies of an Esther Rodostamos, the bigotry and retribution of an Helena Perowska, the terrier-like tenacity of a Julie de Kerezoff, the visionary Utopia of a Mellin, the fierce fanaticism of a Bakounine, the insidious courtliness of a Karishkin, all would have come under one category of peace-disturbers, republicans, and revolutionists.

Luckily for her, she had no conception of the ends and aims of Bianca's existence, and Fitz, who, enlightened by his conversations with Hudson, suspected something very like the truth, both as to the girl's romantic hero-worship, and her participation in those political doctrines which were to reform the World, wisely and kindly kept his peace. Bianca gone, with no one to excuse her rebellions, no one to mention her, the young man's heart relented towards his girl-love; and in his hunger to hear some voice soften over the syllables of her name, he fell into a form of special pleading that became the accepted tone where Bianca was concerned.

In one matter Hero's fortunes had been less evil than they had seemed.

A clerical error in a report, a too prompt adoption of the mistake, had spoken her father's fiat before the time. A certain Gabriel Ovens had died on the mines where Mr. Owen was inspecting the works, and the initial G. had grown into Garry, and Ovens followed suit as Owen.

But for that capital letter, Bianca would probably have perished in the Palace explosion. She owed her life, indirectly, to the haste of a telegraph clerk, and Mellin's rare mood of relenting tenderness to an initial error.

Fortunately, young Hudson, who had in the course of his travels come upon Mr. Owen, and agreed to travel with him to England, telegraphed to his mother to that effect; and the kind old lady lost no moment in communicating with Hero, whose mourning was thus turned into unexpected joy.

Mr. Owen's fine, buoyant Irish nature sent him home in no wise impressed with a sense of failure because he had discovered that his much-advertised, much-vaunted mine was a huge American swindle, palmed off upon a too-confiding British public, solely because the

‘cuteness’ of the Transatlantic character, makes it both difficult and risky to attempt such vast fraud on the wide-awake native. He consoled himself by the reflection that he had seen something of the world in his travels, and by asserting that the generous and confiding simplicity of his own nature, made it impossible he should suspect others of less integrity than he himself possessed.

Mrs. Fitzgerald lived to see the first flush of June, and when she died it was found that the sum of money she had originally left to Hero, ‘in recognition of her untiring and affectionate care,’ had, by his daughter’s request, been transferred to the testator’s ‘dear and only brother, Garry Owen, for his lifetime, to revert at his death to the said Hero Martello.’

Drawn still closer to Hero by the loss of his mother, Fitz, when not at Oxford, spent most of his time with father and daughter, not only a welcome inmate, but almost indispensable to both, as sympathiser, adviser, and friend. Mr. Owen’s really generous nature caused him to remember many an act of what he called ‘munificence’ on the young man’s part. His mother’s death had made a rich man of Fitz, and more than once his uncle proposed that they should

all live together. But Fitz could not tear himself away from Oxford, and Hero would not give up her independence. There was no necessity for her to work, but she determined to use her great gift for charitable purposes. This would give her an object in life, and save her from brooding over the unalterable, in idle regret. For, in the hidden depths of her nature, Hero was profoundly miserable.

Graham, whose notes to her had, to outward seeming, been purely conventional—a few words about his work, a sentence or two about Bianca—had gradually allowed longer and longer intervals to elapse between his communications. Then he wrote to say that he was going to Moscow, where he should be busy for several months, but would write again on his return to St. Petersburg, after which he would probably leave almost immediately for England, when he should hope to find them all well. This, supplemented by such gossip as Bianca sent, in which casual mention was made of the beautiful Greek, the mysterious portrait, the lady's friendship for the artist, and so on, was not calculated to reassure Hero.

She told herself that she expected nothing and deserved nothing; that Graham's happi-

ness was all she desired, and that, if he were content, why, so was she. Personal happiness, such as some women command, had never been her portion; and at this period of her existence she often recalled, with a smile, the reply of a lady who, a tremendous flirt in her maidenhood, had absorbed all the devotional faculties and the undivided fortunes of three husbands, and was about, so Rumour said, to take a fourth spouse. Intruding her unasked-for, and perhaps not very delicate sympathy on the shrinking Hero, notoriously the victim of conjugal cruelty, she remarked complacently: ‘Well, my dear, of course it’s very hard; but you’ve got to bear it, you know, and there are lots of old maids worse off than you are. I’m not so sure, after all, but that it’s better for you, especially as you have your delightful little girl. A husband isn’t everything. As you’ve got to get along alone, the sooner you bring your mind to it the better it will be!’

The advice Hero had always acknowledged to be sound, as far as it went; but she would have found her task easier had she known the true story of Graham’s silence, and her mind been soothed by the undoubted assurance of his content.

CHAPTER XLIV.

DISCOMFITURE AND TRIUMPH.

THE Countess Helena Perowska was too influential and too popular a person to be easily spared from the circle of which she was the centre ; nor was it likely that Mellin, and those with whom he acted, would willingly have risked one of their finest, brightest, and most indispensable instruments, where a coarser and commoner tool, would equally well answer the purpose.

The faculty of choosing the best agents for the work in hand, postulates the eye and the judgment of a Master ; and the governing spirits who ruled that special section of the 'Cause' (for which the humblest of its adherents, as the highest, must hold himself ready, at any moment, to lay down his life), were wise enough to disdain none, however insignificant the apparent functionary of vengeance might be.

Helena might assert her claim, and reassert it; the right of executive judgment, urged by the impassioned representations of a beautiful, influential, and deeply-injured woman, would meet with some sympathy and consideration, but it was with positive relief that Mellin found himself in the street, after his interview with her, on the day following the explosion at the Winter Palace.

On the previous evening, after leaving Bianca, he had, in passing the Perowsky Palace, desired that a carriage might be sent for the Signorina Martello, and had then sped upon his mysterious way.

The change that had come over Helena Perowska during the last few weeks was no secret to the Triumvirate, to whom all her movements were known. If 'walls have ears,' so too have hangings, picture frames, screens, lounges, fauteuils, cabinets, and curtains.

The Empress's almoner was vowed to 'the Cause'; one of her physicians had already been replaced on suspicion; the nurses were continually changed. Police surveillance did not pause on the threshold of the sick-room, and if the '*Ispravnik*' (or detective police), and even the '*Stanovie*' (town ditto), flattered

themselves that nothing took place between the Countess Perowska and her dying mistress without their being informed of it, the Executive were also instructed (and that not by the Countess) of the august Lady's most secret prayers, commands, and wishes.

A month since, Mellin had been moved to say a word to their Head, known as 'Primus.' It was simply to the effect that, in the approaching conjunction of affairs, Helena Perowska must no longer be counted upon.

'Nor do we dream of employing her,' was the answer. 'Something had to be allowed in view of a justifiable exasperation, but common tools are good enough for rough work of that kind.'

'But if she should claim the fulfilment of the promise which she invariably assumes we made?'

'She will do nothing of the sort. The prejudices and principles of earlier years are apt to play us false with emotional women of her kind. That is the position at the present moment.'

'Do you mean that *she* will play us false?' asked Mellin in so strange a tone of voice that both his companions looked up at him in sudden surprise.

‘She dare not,’ replied Secundus, grimly brief.

‘Is anyone ever false to the Cause?’ asked Primus in a lighter tone. ‘Who breaks pays. A woman’s word is lightly broken, but not *so* lightly when she pays for the breakage with her pretty little head.’

‘However that may be,’ replied Secundus, ‘we have nothing to fear. Helena Perowska will not be false to us, because, in the first instance, we shall not ask her to be true. We agreed to let her play a leading part. If, for reasons which we need not enlarge upon, but which are equally well known to us all, she now prefers a subordinate *rôle*, that is no crime. Her daily visits to the Winter Palace may be usefully cited as an opportune proof of her devoted loyalty. Her people, her servants, her *demoiselle de compagnie* are thus afforded opportunities which no mere “outsider” could enjoy, without Suspicion dogging his steps. You say the girl is clever. She seems to be of no particular nationality. If she disappears, there will be no importunate Government worrying the Foreign Office with despatches about a person whose existence cannot signify to any created being. These are the people who are really useful to us. Your “distinguished personages,” like brilliant ge-

niuses, are disturbing elements. The difficulty of finding employment for their energies, of gratifying their restless vanity, of keeping them out of mischief, and binding them down to discretion, makes the acquisition of so-called "influential" members a very doubtful advantage from my point of view, though I know Tertius does not agree with me. For the rest, it is as well that you remembered to warn us of Helena Perowska's temporary indisposition,' he added, 'for although we knew it already, it is better such matters should be fairly discussed and finally disposed of when favourable chance finds us in conclave assembled.'

It was a delicate method of letting Mellin know that he, too, was watched.

Primus, whose farewell words were spoken as he was about to mount his *telega*, wore his blue touloupe, sheepskin cap, huge leather boots and false flaxen beard as to the manner born; but he betrayed nothing of this calm, characteristic, and impartial mind when, three hours later, in the dazzling uniform of the most brilliant of light cavalry regiments, he bent over the Countess Perowska's hand, murmuring in his softest tones the most ingenious flatteries that carping vanity could crave.

He professed himself a Slav of Slavs, and was understood to make his court rather to the coming, than to the reigning Cæsar. A long pedigree, enormous wealth, European travel, princely alliances, immense landed possessions, and a vast palace, constituted him a 'personage' in St. Petersburg Society. Tall, pale and dark, with a smooth face, large brown moustache, blue eyes, and all the characteristic *ljenj* of Slavonic races, Colonel Count Chamoffsky was looked upon as a dandy, an exquisite, a lady-killer, an aristocrat, and an idler. Not one of the hundreds affiliated to his section of the 'Cause' recognised in him, the masked Primus of debate.

Secundus, whose name was known all over the educated world, had graduated at three European universities, was a linguist of the first rank, a brilliant journalist and an accomplished politician, but even by those who knew him best in secret council, was not identified with the popular editor of the most widely-read Russian journal of the day. Dressed in the ordinary garb of a *moujik*, his fair hair disguised by a long black wig, and his smooth cheeks hidden by a full beard, he drank his glass of *kvass* with unflinching gusto, and

smoked his pipe, amicably hobnobbing with the drovers and peasants who stopped on their way home from the cattle market to give their beasts a drink, and to refresh their inner men at the different *Kabaki*, or road-side inns. Mellin, 'Tertius,' in the garb of a pedlar, had laid aside his pack, whilst he chatted in a low tone with his ostensibly 'chance acquaintances' behind the stove; and when the time came for him to shoulder his wares, and he bade the host and the wayfarers, still drinking tea and *vodka*, a pleasant good-night, he announced that he had many a mile to trudge, ere he should reach his night's shelter.

The very same evening Helena Perowska had somewhat startled her friends.

Esther Rodostamos, followed quickly by Julie Kerezoff, had asked in her gayest tones if she might send her servants home, and spend a couple of hours with Helena and her friends.

'By all means. Ivan will take care of Chelanska, who will certainly prefer waiting for you,' Helena had replied; adding, 'Keep guard yourself, my good Ivan; I am not at home to anyone besides these ladies, my friends.'

If she had been a little estranged from them of late; if the one or the other felt any

soreness, any consciousness of neglect, any rankling sense of other, and stronger, interests having diverted Helena Perowska's mind from its usual channels, her sweet, cordial tone was in itself enough to win her pardon from any but the most obdurate.

Bianca, who had viewed the Countess's frequent visits to the Recluse of the Winter Palace with more than suspicion, glanced shrewdly for a moment at the speaker.

Julie de Kerezoff slightly knit her thin brows; Esther Rodostamos looked openly into her hostess's fair face, and, drawing nearer to her by the hand she held, kissed Helena lightly yet tenderly on her beautiful pale cheek.

For a short time the conversation seemed as though it refused to run in pleasant grooves. There was an unmistakable air of constraint, an artificiality of tone, an effort and a stiffness, as though each one present had her own private thoughts and pre-occupations, and did not care to be the first to break down the barriers of reserve.

A chance remark presently gave the opportunity, and Helena Perowska was not slow to avail herself of it.

‘Ah! it is not others, it is ourselves we

should mistrust,' she cried. 'Who can be sure of his motives? Who can swear that, as he thinks and feels to day, so he will think and feel for ever? Is it not this sentiment that oppresses us, when we see fair young lives, in the first anguish of deception and disillusionment, vowing themselves to eternal solitude—to life-long despair? It is not the gloom, or the monotony of the cloister; it is its irrevocability that makes it seem to the looker-on so awful a sacrifice—so utter a death in life.'

'Do you mean, Helena Paulovna,' asked Julie Kerezoff in her thin, high tones, that seemed to slice the words like steel, 'that grown women should not know their own minds, and be able to answer for them as well as men? That is an old-world doctrine indeed, worthy of the most rabid retrogradist.'

'Ah! but what woman knows where her heart begins and where her mind leaves off, Julie Petrovna? There is the difficulty. What we feel, and what we think, is so inextricably mixed up that who shall answer for herself, when a sudden revelation shows her that her heart is in opposition to her mind?'

'Who shall answer for herself? That is precisely, Helena Paulovna, what each one of

us has to do ; to herself, and to the "Cause." I served my apprenticeship in the Circle of the *Ciaikovsi*, so-called, as you know, after a young student, Nicholas Ciaikovsky, who preached the propaganda to what seemed a family party rather than a political club. Yet I can assure you we had to answer, not only to our own consciences, but to one another, for moral perfection, self-devotion, liberty, fraternity, and equality. The frankness and feeling of profound friendship which existed amongst us, enabled the members to point out, one to another, every little weakness, indiscretion, or want of devotion or endurance, to the "Cause." The rules were rigorous and austere, I might almost say "monastic," whilst they were productive of a most affectionate, devoted, and enthusiastic feeling amongst us. Many strong personal friendships, of an ideal character, were founded by these means. Here I first learned to know Mellin—and others who are expiating their generous aspirations afar ! But, I assure you, it would never have occurred to any one of us to say that we did not know our own individual mind !' And there was something of warning, almost of threatening, in Julie's tone.

'Ah, you speak truly ; you do well to

remind me of that twofold responsibility, Julie Petrovna,' Helena replied; 'but an oath even to the "Cause" might be remitted, I believe, if one went honourably to the Head and revealed one's scruples and unworthiness.'

'God forbid!' interrupted Julie de Kerezoff. 'You forget, Helena Paulovna, you have not here to deal with mumbling, shuffling, half-imbecile "popes," hypocrites who flatter themselves and their victims that they can bind and loose, and pull the strings that make their puppets dance to suit their own interests. "Unworthiness" means death with us. The Cause admits no power of withdrawal. Once a freemason, always a freemason. You must live and die bound by the oaths you have taken. You took them of your own free-will; you cannot be allowed to go out into the World and babble away the lives of honourable men, of patriots, of heroes——'

'Is it to me that you speak, Julie Petrovna?'

'To you, to all; I should have said "we," for what applies to one applies to all. I mean no offence; but I recognise only one law and one duty.'

'Happy You! that can say so,' Helena

replied with a sad and gentle dignity ; ‘but you are right, Julie Petrovna, and it is I who am to blame for explaining myself so ill. But that——’ and she looked round sadly and appealingly at the others, until, her eyes meeting Esther’s, a soft, full smile rose out of the depths of her own, as finding and reposing on the restfulness of love. ‘I have been ill and sore perplexed,’ she went on more rapidly, ‘but I owe it to myself, and to you, all of you, by chance here assembled, to say that, whatever you may hear, or think, to the contrary, I am true to the “Cause.”’

‘No one was ever false to it—and lived!’ muttered Julie de Kerezoff below her breath.

‘I am true to the “Cause,”’ Helena repeated, looking at Julie but not otherwise noticing the interruption ; ‘it is a true and just Cause, and its grievances and its aims, in so far as they are the grievances and aims of thousands, are true and just ; but I am no longer true to myself. I am not in unison with myself. Where I had thought myself strongest, there I find that I am weakest ; where I believed that I stood, I have to take heed lest I fall. I have asked, and shall obtain, leave to retire for a time into the country, there in

solitude to strengthen and refresh myself ; to grow again clear and calm in my conviction that there is, and can be only, and eternally, but one Right and one Wrong ! ’ She paused for a moment, and seemed as if considering her words.

Julie de Kerezoff’s gimlet gaze, if it could have drilled holes into that brain (which, she reflected, might even now be seeking the words that should most skilfully conceal thought), could scarcely have been more persistently penetrating. Esther’s large glance was full of liberal love and warm pity, not unmixed with surprise.

Bianca, both excited and anxious, like the young war-horse snuffing the battle from afar, enjoying the dust and the din in eager anticipation of the fray, lifted her head and listened.

‘ I am true to the Cause,’ Helena went on after a few minutes’ silence, ‘ but I am not true to myself ; and if you judge me twice as severely as I judge myself, you will be yet too lenient. It is not to bespeak your indulgence that I say what I do, but—oh ! ’ and leaving her measured sentences far behind, she suddenly rose and stood up amongst them. ‘ By all I suffer now, I would ask you, all of you, to think, to consider, to weigh well, before it is

too late, the awful oaths, the tremendous obligations you lay upon your souls. Look! for I must be truthful, even at the risk of offending you. Which amongst us is disinterested? Which acts from purely impersonal motives, free from all taint of passion or revenge? You, Julie, who laugh at the vows of religion, do you not give a more implicit obedience, a blinder faith to your leaders than any priest exacts? And do not these bind awful promises upon your soul, so grievous to the weaker part of our humanity, that their haunting presence scarcely can be borne? Is your end and aim only, and solely, the good of your country, done for love of your fellow-countrymen? Or is it not rather a spirit of personal revenge that you have suffered to lie rankling within, until it has eaten into your being, until the very kisses of your children have lost their sweetness for you, and your husband's caresses have grown irksome? Who am I that I should reproach you? you will ask. It is because I am what I am, that I ask you to search out your own heart before it is too late! And still more—what am I, who am I, that I should set up a standard of right and wrong, and expect impossibilities of One human creature,

whose position, education, antecedents, surroundings, make the Ideal we place upon a pedestal and worship, as impossible of realisation as though we put a chisel in the hand of a peasant, and exacted of him the work of a Praxiteles? Can we blow the breath of life into the clay nostrils and create, at our will, demigods that shall be our rulers? Is it for us, poor, miserable, futile shortcomers that we are, to insist that this One Man, this victim of Fate, shall fulfil all our impossible fancies,—or die? And if, in our own limited circle, this picture of monstrous exaction and personal motive be true, how much more true is it of the World outside? What vanities and spites, what pettiness and vengeance, what idleness and rebellion, what follies of the brain and exaggerations of the fancy, delude men along the thorny way which they flatter themselves leads to glory! What one man, what single hero of antiquity, what leader of legislative assemblies in the palmiest days of Rome or Greece, could do what you expect this One Man to do—this pigmy (as you are wont to declare) of the Present? In all history, ancient or modern, so far as you know it, what Atlas could bear on his shoulders the

burthen of the inherited abuses of such a world as you would superimpose on His? Is it just, is it fair, is it reasonable, is it humane, or even human, to expect that the long inheritance of misdoing, of misapprehension, of misgovernment, heaped in one undying legacy upon one sole, irresponsible, individual Man, should be flung in his face like the voluntary crime of a persistent malefactor? And is it not we rather who are mad, expecting He shall do miracles, or, like the gods, work wonders, which, in the old world, only the accumulated centuries accomplished? She paused, but no one spoke.

‘Let me say this. Our “Cause” is just and true. But if we would be true, if we would be *as* true, and *as* just, as our “Cause,” we must be worthy of it; and we must search our very heart of hearts to see how much is petty and personal in our devotion to it. New times have produced new men; this is a time of transition, a time for reflection. The world is intolerant of violence, and crimes can never persuade our enemies that we have reached the point of self-government, or scaled the heights of experience, where further political education is superfluous. I know wherein I have sinned, and that very knowledge gives me courage thus

to speak to you. You, Julie Petrovna, are angry with me ;' and she held her hand out with a smile, but the friendly advance was not accepted. 'No? You will not even shake hands with me? Even my little Martellina, who has eaten bread and salt with me for many months, looks at me with suspicious, unfriendly eyes ; only Esther Rodostamos, the only pure soul amongst us—I mean politically pure—is not angry with me. Each of us pursues her own chimera, calling it by the sacred name of duty ; I, first and foremost, chiefest amongst such sinners ; Julie Petrovna no less ; and even my little butterfly of a Martellina has some small private grudge of her own, some little personal endkin or aimlet to gratify, quite outside our grand political programme. Esther only, so far as I can see, is happy in a pure and simple philanthropy ; she who seeks to help the sick, the sorrowful and the oppressed, to succour the needy, and save the starving, is by her acts at variance with her principles. Her life is purely constructive. She professes the tenets of destruction, but what does she annihilate? Not so much as a fly ;' and having reached that harmless climax of illustration, Helena cried, with a tear in her eye and a break in

her voice that belied her attempted jest, 'I will say no more, and trust to time, dear friends, for your forgiveness.'

'God bless and comfort you and give you peace! Helena Paulovna,' whispered Esther Rodostamos as, half an hour later, she kissed her hostess in farewell.

'Good-bye, God bless you; think of me, pray for me, my sweet Esther,' Helena replied.

Julie de Kerezoff so managed that her farewells should not pledge her palm to that of 'the traitress,' as she mentally designated Countess Perowsky.

'There is treason in the camp,' she whispered to Mellin, whom she met on the threshold as she went out. He had lost his pedlar's pack by the way, and was in all the glory of official *tenue*; stars, orders, and ribands galore.

But he only shook his head and smiled.

'As for you, my poor child,' Helena said, gently smoothing back Bianca's hair as she stood looking after her last guest, 'I do not know whether speech or silence be best; in doubt, I choose the latter; but yours is an infatuation within an infatuation. It will perhaps burn itself out in the pure heat of its own vestal fire, and leave nothing but a little cloud of

fragrant incense behind. But at your age, my child, Life was (to me) already a bitter reality, and yet I know not how to guide you for the best, despite the lessons of experience, and my care and love. Write to your mother, to-night, before sleeping. Nature finds its own remedy ; we intermeddlers only mar the work.'

CHAPTER XLV.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

BIANCA sat pen in hand and pondered, but her letter to her mother did not get itself written.

She would wait.

Her triumph could not now be long delayed, and in its completeness lay her justification. Mellin had chosen her ; he could not draw back now. By his own open and unbiassed choice he had tacitly pledged himself to a certain course of action. She could afford to wait.

With the divine blindness of youth, believing what it wishes to believe, self-confident, ardent, romantic, Bianca was yet so much a child in all her girlish folly that the unconditional element of a woman's riper love, fear, was entirely absent ; infatuated with the fantastic phantoms of her own excited imagination, Bianca went triumphantly along her glorified way.

Again and again she wondered that Mellin did not come ; again and again she reassured herself, and pleased her fancy by rehearsing the probable ' how and when ' of his formal declaration.

In the confusion that ensued upon the explosion in the Winter Palace, Bianca's letter had disappeared ; it seemed probable that Mellin had destroyed it with the papers which he had so hastily reduced to ashes the same day, and of which no damnatory remains could be allowed to betray his connection with subsequent disaster.

All was confusion.

His hurried words to Bianca that evening certainly implied that the Countess would make some communication to her, but although the carriage duly came to take her home, she found the house empty on her arrival, and the general excitement, the coming and going, and the fever of gossip that followed the explosion were too overpowering for the girl to obtrude her petty personal affairs on a great lady absorbed in all the cares of the Court mourning which almost immediately followed, and pre-occupied by endless discussion of the question of social disintegration.

Julie de Kerezoff, for prudential reasons,

kept very quiet just at this time, and thus it came about that Bianca only learned her mother's bad news, when the telegram explaining how the error had arisen, was put into her hands.

Her own condition was one of too much mental excitement for anything unless it bore upon her immediate surroundings, to touch her very nearly. Two thoughts animated her.

Mellin had judged her worthy to be his chosen instrument; had, in fact, selected her out of all those at his command to do the work in hand. Mellin had shown a tenderness, not at all in accordance with his general character, and, at the eleventh hour, had exposed himself to the charge and reproach of inconsistency, by throwing up the whole arrangement, changing his scheme, or at least the persons selected to execute it, and, at the cost of frantic labour and a dangerously narrow margin of time, conducting the whole matter, as it were, by a miracle, to a safe conclusion.

Why had he done this?

Because—there could be no doubt about it—the infatuated girl told herself, his heart bade him! The honour he would have allowed her, as his chosen instrument, to reap side by side with

him, at the risk, at the cost of life, had seemed to him too dearly bought, at the price of possible sacrifice. Degrading her, on the one hand, from that pedestal where he had elected to place her, robbing her of the nimbus of glory which she was to share with him, he had, on the other, by the saving and succouring quality of his love, raised her to a yet higher pinnacle. Who knew but that, side by side with him, she might go down to posterity, the executrix of a new dispensation? Who could say but that they two might be called upon to bear together the beacon-light of Liberty, to lead the van of the vast army gathered beneath the banner of Freedom, and to head the march of Independence? Visions of the Goddess of Liberty, of Joan of Arc, of Boadicea, of Zenobia, of Semiramis, of Cleopatra, passed across the girl's excited brain. The women of antiquity were not dead; the Spartan mothers, the Roman matrons, had left many an inheritrix of their daring resolution and courage behind; it was only occasion, opportunity, that failed the women of to-day, smothered by the commonplace of centuries. When the time was ripe they too would be found ready, despite the vulgarisms of a material age.

Let Esther Rodostamos, with all her beauty and twice her wealth, put forth what fascinations she might, it mattered not. Let women lovely as Aurora, bewitching as Euphrosyne, try the potency of their spells, they would try them in vain, the infatuated girl declared triumphantly to herself.

Mellin loved her.

He had loved her at Sprudelheim; he had loved her on the wild hill-side when, with cold and lingering hand, he had hung that sign about her neck which pledged her to him and his, body and soul, for life and death. He had loved her when he had striven, beneath assumed coldness of manner, to hide his secret emotion from curious and prying eyes. But duty to 'the Cause,' duty to his country, laid a repressive finger on his lips and reduced him to implicit silence. What matter? Was she a vulgar girl to flaunt her lover, or boast of him to a pack of envious companions? Did the commonplace aspects of marriage, and the prosaic picture of humdrum happiness, offer such potent attractions that she need desire that routine consummation of the stereotyped wedding-cake, and the regulation-bridesmaid's order, so 'devoutly wished for' by the every-

day, colourless, insignificant type of conventional young lady? Bah! He loved her, and 'love is enough,' the poor deluded child declared to herself, as she walked to and fro in an ecstasy of triumph and joy.

She paused, clasped her hot and throbbing head between her cold hands, and pressing her face close to her mirror, looked long and fixedly at it. All she could see were two glowing, brilliant eyes, the pupils unnaturally dilated, returning her ardent gaze with radiant scrutiny. Was she fair? Had she inherited her mother's beauty? Would she grace his choice? Was she worthy to be presented to his friends? Or would they vouchsafe only the glance of rapid indifference, perhaps of wonder, that such a man, so stern, so self-concentrated, full of such silent energy, should have chosen so slight and poor a thing for his own? Ah! but he should see. He should find how well she might be trusted, how secret, how loyal, prompt, and obedient she could be. Some day she would tell him all she had suffered—aye, and sacrificed—for his sake. How steadfast she had been; defying all ties, mother, aunt, friends, Fitz, even her gentle yet determined grandmother, rather than betray by so much as one letter a single

syllable of the trust committed to her charge! Ah! once he had said that the ideal Woman was an English lady. And he had dwelt on the grace and charm and dignity of that one word 'lady,' saying it was a crown of glory circling the simple charm of womanhood. He, otherwise so reserved, had drawn a picture in those few words of quiet enthusiasm which had revealed the gentle susceptibilities hidden beneath his abstracted, indifferent manner.

It might be that no word of love would ever pass his lips, bound as he was to duties that could only end with life, pledged by oaths that included the happiness or the misery of millions. What need of speech was there between them? He had chosen her out of countless hundreds at his command to carry out his plan, and then his heart had risen up in revolt, and the hand that had been lifted to point the way along the dazzling path to Fame, was suddenly stretched forth to snatch her back, in an agony of terror, from the brink of destruction. He risked reputation, even reprimand, perhaps disgrace; and—yet—he risked them! Had he been five minutes too late, had the premeditated plan failed by the merest hitch, the consequences to him would have been incalculable. But he

had ventured all things, including the wasted labour of a lifetime, to save her life !

And then what delicacy, what tenderness and careful forethought he had shown ! Not in his own rooms, not to an unprotected girl, an involuntary guest, perforce the recipient of his temporary hospitality, liable to be broken in upon by subordinates at any moment, would he address one word of the ardent love burning within his breast. No look, no touch, no tone, should betray him or alarm her ; he would bide his time, and prove to her that she had no cause to count on less than his absolute devotion.

What a delightfully futile excuse he had given ; he had rescinded his orders and altered his plan because ‘ there was a letter for her to read ! ’

Well ! she would pretend to take him at his word ; she would accept that excuse until the happy hour when he should see fit to divulge his true reason. He had not sought to comfort her, in her terror, by caresses, as an ordinary man might have done. He had left her at his feet, feeling that she would divine the delicate instincts that prompted his reticence of gesture, and lent an added reserve to his tone. She would prove to him that she had

no desire to drag him down to the ordinary level ; he should walk, untrammelled, unhindered, independent and free, to the goal he had himself appointed.

The excitement that prevailed all over the city, and pervaded all classes of Society, might have accounted even to more exact observers for the light in Bianca's eye, the spring of her elastic tread. Happiness lent a sweetness and ease to the girl's manner which it had needed hitherto, and shed a pleasant playfulness across her tone that gave her a charm which no one had heretofore suspected in her.

She was ready to spend the day with, and join in the feeble romps of the shrill little Kerezoffs ; and even the poor harassed Julie acknowledged that Bianca had grown far more lovable, as she marked her merry humours with the pale little creatures whose young lives seemed to suffer some mysterious blight.

Count Perowsky, incapable of understanding the nicer gradations of the feminine temperament, simply concluded that Bianca (whose 'stand-aloofishness' at once exasperated and attracted his perverse imagination) now saw the error of her former ways, and, in consequence, would be more disposed than formerly to smile

upon such gallantries as he might think fit to offer.

The outside world was gloomy, and Society was silent and secret, for no man could trust his neighbour.

The general feeling pointed to as speedy an exodus from the capital as circumstances would permit, and on country estates the agents were busy, and the stoves were lighted, windows mended, and a trim coat of paint smeared over ruin much earlier than usual, in anticipation of the proximate arrival of the lords of the soil.

Old Prince Karishkin, coming one afternoon from the Kerezoffs, announced that his daughter-in-law was so much better that the whole party might be expected with the first warm days from Egypt, *en route* for the Crimea, whither the Princess Paul expected that Bianca should accompany her.

Instinct told the girl that she would do well to avail herself of the kindly invitation. How protect herself from the husband's offensive admiration at the expense of his wife's peace of mind? How degrade so kind yet so proud a lady as the Countess Perowsky by complaining to her of her faithless husband's

attentions to a dependant, an insignificant little girl, a chance inmate and member of the household? It would sound like a piece of gross and impertinent conceit; and between the disdainful incredulity of the stately wife, and the indignant denial of the foolish husband, Bianca would forfeit the esteem of both, and make two enemies.

And yet—and yet—how leave St. Petersburg and the Perowskys for the Karishkin exile to the vast solitudes and green horizons of monotonous Crimean estates? At Semonow she would be within a drive of the capital; in the Crimea it would be a long journey, and require an urgent pretext, to bring her back to St. Petersburg.

As it was, the Countess Helena, who ever since the death of the Empress had been deeply depressed, was ordered by her physician to leave St. Petersburg without delay. Bianca was sent to Julie de Kerezoff with instructions to await further orders, and it was with a light heart she saw the Count and Countess depart for their country estates. A holiday at the Kerezoffs, and frequent opportunities of seeing Mellin, together with a sense of relief at having got rid of a difficulty she could not

solve, drove Bianca's moral mercury up to 'set fair.'

'Martellina *mia* !' wrote the Countess. 'I am already better for my week of quiet and fresh air. By the time you come to Semonow we shall be in first-rate beauty. I find the time hang rather heavily on my hands. Please go to the Hôtel Perowsky, and in my boudoir you will find the black satin I am embroidering for my dwarf screen. Send me the three panels by our agent, who will be in St. Petersburg the day after to-morrow. I have written to our good friend Mellin, to forward me the books he spoke of, by the same opportunity. Send me a letter full of St. Petersburg gossip. Even a little scandal would be acceptable to your *dévouée*,

'HELENA.'

Bianca, kneeling by a low settee, the ground covered with satin and embroidery silks, absorbed in her own thoughts, in eager haste to finish her task, lest her parcel should not be ready for the agent, was packing against time. She did not see the door open behind her, and a face full of eager curiosity, and latent mischief peep through the opening. The well-

oiled lock betrayed no other presence than her own.

A smile of intense satisfaction, not unmingled with fatuity, spread over the intruder's countenance.

The vast hotel was as good as empty; the porter downstairs had orders to admit no one; the fireman was absent on a distant errand; the porter's wife was a helpless cripple; the agent was not to be here for another hour. The whole *Dvorovié* (*valetaille*) had been despatched to Semonow.

With stealthy tread and dexterous hand, Count Michael Perowsky advanced into the room, closing the massive door gently behind him. His very footsteps were disguised by the thick Persian rugs laid down by careful servants to spare the costly polished parquet flooring the injury of chance scratches. Anyone visiting the room for the purpose of airing it, could traverse the shining surface from door to window, by means of these precautionary rugs; and upon them, Count Michael now stepped unheard by Bianca, until within touch of the unconscious girl.

Her slender figure, seen in *silhouette* on the bright background of the window, was as

lithe and graceful as that of a classic nymph ; and as she stooped to her work, bending now to this side, now to that, the perfect symmetry of her form appeared to the greatest advantage.

She had been so much ‘ jollier ’ of late that, but for the airs and graces of a certain person now absent, he might long ere this have established a better understanding with this impulsive black-eyed Italian girl, as independent as an American, as fearless as an Englishwoman, as impassioned, or her looks belied her, as a Spaniard. The bigotry and pious vagaries of the absent semi-saint set a restraint over everything, which by its silent tyranny reduced life to a dead level of spiritless uniformity.

Count Perowsky was of that order of Lothario which holds that the way of a man with a maid must be a bold and flattering way, a cavalier and gallant way, a rousing, conquering-hero way ; not a bashful, blundering, or tenderly respectful way. It was a tenet of his, that a woman always forgave everything, provided the offender only pretended penitence, and pleaded the potency of her charms in extenuation of his too ardent admiration.

As Bianca knelt upon the floor, smoothing

out the lengths of black satin with her long white hands, the curve of her shoulders turned now to this side, now to that, her attitude left her quite defenceless against surprise.

A moment more and two strong arms were about her, and before she could twist herself round or escape indignantly from the sudden embrace, the welcome thought came to her that she had no need to struggle with her lover. In a second, he would release her without an effort on her part.

But although she rose quickly from her knees, the firm hold was not relaxed, and the person who held her was so entirely out of sight that she had as yet caught no glimpse of his face.

‘You are teasing me,’ she cried, a happy smile spreading unconsciously over her face. ‘I knew it was you. Your incognito being lost, you may as well let us talk face to face.’

She did not know him in this sportive mood, but she would have to learn him in all his moods and tenses, this, as well as any other. It was not for her to play the prude if his mood were to unbend.

‘Did you really know me? Did you? Were you not the least little bit startled?’ said

a low voice at the back of the knot of hair, against which the speaker's very lips seemed to rest.

‘Frightened? Of what? Not of you,’ she said, turning her head over her shoulder, with beautiful laughing lips, and teeth gleaming with glee, a ‘goddess fair and free, In heaven yclept Euphrosyne.’

There was no roughness, no struggling between them, as there might have been, had the girl resisted. In her unquestioning faith and implicit reliance, she suffered his humour to prevail, pleased with anything he chose to do, because it was he!

‘You knew I should not part from you as I seemed to do; that it was only circumstances, prudence, which forced me to act as I did,’ he whispered, enchanted by her passive mood, and wishing to make assurance doubly sure.

‘I knew? Of course I knew! But why should we whisper? I declare I have caught it of you! We are alone, and can say what we choose.’

This was a far easier conquest than even he had bargained for. So much the better. ‘Why not?’ he whispered, releasing his hold, and Bianca slipped round in the relaxed em-

brace to find herself face to face with Michael Perowsky.

‘You! You?’ she almost shrieked, as she started back in a revulsion of terror and indignation.

‘I—I? Of course I. Who else?’ imitating her stammering accents.

Who else? Had she betrayed herself? Who else?

‘Well?’ he asked, his face distorted by a vicious sneer.

‘You have played me a dastard’s trick!’

Count Perowsky flushed a deep angry red. ‘Those are ugly words, Mlle. Martello. It seems to me you made me—or my rival—very welcome!’

‘You may spare me your insults, Count Perowsky. Your taunts do not concern me. You have taken a base advantage of me. I came here by the Countess’s orders. Now, please, stand aside and let me pass. I wish to go home. The parcel is there. You can tie it up, and give it to the agent, or you can explain why it is not sent—whichever you like!’

Her tone of contemptuous fearlessness exasperated him.

‘If you go out, the servants will believe

you made an assignation to meet me here,' he said insolently. 'For the rest, I am not here to tie up your parcels !'

'Very likely. Servants' thoughts or opinions are their own. They are welcome to them. The parcel is your's to leave or take.'

'—— Or I can tell the Countess that you had made the appointment with me yourself.'

'She knows *me* too well to believe *you*.'

He felt all the degrading, insulting truth of the remark, and it did not dispose him more amiably towards his rebellious victim.

'Look here,' he said setting his teeth, whilst Bianca thought how like a bull-dog's the debased Calmuck face became, in its snarling mood, 'you are alone in this house with me. The fireman is at the other end of the city ; the porter dare not leave his post ; his wife is crippled. If you were to scream there is not a soul to hear you ; you are absolutely in my power, and I advise you not to exasperate me.'

'Let me pass.'

'Not yet.'

'Count Perowsky, you are a coward ! Let me pass.'

'Not until you tell me for whom you mistook me.'

‘Never! Let me pass.’

‘No. As you have used my house for a place of assignation, you shall first tell me your lover’s name, or’ (with an oath) ‘I lock that door and deal with you as I choose.’

‘*What? Threats? Intimidation? And from you—you—Michael Nicolaievitch?*’

Mellin stood upon the threshold. The clear, high tones of his voice, so unlike his usual veiled monotone, startled both, whilst it enchanted one of the actors in this sorry scene.

‘What are *you* doing here?’ cried Count Perowsky, livid with rage and baffled fury. ‘I suppose I can speak to my own servants!’

‘I am here by the Countess’s request, to send her some books by the agent who was to meet me here.’

‘Damnation!’

‘But it is I who must ask you, Michael Nicolaievitch, What are you doing here?—intimidating a young lady, your wife’s guest, a foreigner——’

‘Mind your own business, Serge Constantinovitch.’

‘It is my own business.’

‘Oh, indeed!’ Then, with a sneer, ‘Light begins to break! *You* are the lover! It is

you who have an organised intrigue with this young lady. She need not be so squeamish, since she avails herself of my wife's apartments to meet her lover.'

'No man shall insult any woman in my presence. Let the lady go. I will settle with you, Michael Nicolaievitch, afterwards.'

'If you call it an insult, let the young lady explain. She accepted my endearments, believing me to be somebody else. Whom else it is unnecessary, in the face of this *dénoûment*, to ask.'

Mellin looked inquiringly at Bianca.

'Oh!' she cried, instinctively repelling the invidious assertion, even anxious to clear herself from the possible suspicion of levity, believing in Mellin's emphatic right to an explanation, 'Oh, *I thought it was you!*'

'You see, sir,' said the disenchanted suitor, assuming his 'Society' manner, 'I was right. I have nothing to learn. The young lady came here by arrangement, expecting to meet you.'

'It is false, false, utterly false. I did not know she was coming. I deny it——'

'Yes,' Bianca said softly, stepping forward and laying her hand on Mellin's arm, 'it *is* false that I came to meet you, or you to meet me ;

but it is true that I love you! I am proud to say it. It is true that you love me, and that is to my honour; and it is certain we need not suffer this base man's insults. Let us go out of this house, where the very atmosphere is poisonous. Let us shake its very dust off our feet! Go back with me to Julie de Kerezoff. It were waste of honest anger to quarrel with this,—she hesitated, ‘gentleman,—seeing that his poisoned arrows glance aside and fall harmless. Neither he nor his treacherous barbs can harm us. He aims too low!’

And putting her hand through Mellin's arm, Bianca, a girl no longer, but a calm and courageous woman, strong in conscious honour, and in the integrity of her lover, passed by the place where Michael Perowsky stood, without so much as a look, leaving him baffled, humiliated, and vindictive, to reflect at his leisure upon the sorry figure he had cut in that afternoon's performance!

CHAPTER XLVI.

‘A FEMALE SOMETHING.’

MELLIN was not a person to blind himself to the truth.

• He knew that there was no escape for him. In an hour, unless he forestalled their base mirth, the ribald laughter of every pestilent fellow in every *café* in St. Petersburg where idlers mostly congregated, would re-echo at Bianca's expense.

Riotous living and an unhappy home, the bitter sense of a personal degradation which, after all, he had no right to resent, since it represented his Sovereign's mercy, a degradation which to acknowledge would only be to have the laughs against him instead of on his side, these and other pertinent, if not edifying, circumstances had combined in Michael Perowsky to lower the tone of a character not originally attuned to high things. If, in his careless

levity of speech, he could indifferently blow a woman's reputation to the clouds between the puffs of his cigar smoke, what mercy would he be likely to show when, baffled, defied, his vanity ruthlessly trodden under foot, his self-esteem wounded, and his air of condescending conquest abruptly quenched, the sense of impotent outrage and futile fury, only grew and gathered strength the longer he pondered on the pitiable part he had played, curtly called to order by Mellin and contemptuously spurned by the girl he had 'honoured' with his insulting attentions! He, Count Michael Perowsky, the godson of the late, the *protégé* of the present Emperor, rich, well-born and powerful, ordered out of his own mansion, turned out of his wife's boudoir, defied by a person whom in his rage he designated as an 'impudent serving-wench,' and lectured and sermonised by—but the terms he mentally applied to Mellin, are scarcely susceptible of record in the English language.

Mellin, with face hard set, the death-knell of freedom beating at his heart and dinning in his ears, silent, pale, and stern, walked on by Bianca's side, as unlike a happy lover as is compatible with the image of a settled Despair.

The happy girl, in her buoyant elation

taking all things for granted, never once looked at her lover. As in a dream, she seemed to float forwards, wrapped in rosy clouds of light and love, the golden mist of a glorious dawn, unconscious of everything, and anything, but her vast, entire, surprising, and flawless bliss.

‘You will come in?’ she said at the Kerezoff’s door.

‘I must.’

‘Oh, Madame de Kerezoff! Oh, Julie!’ and Bianca ran forward into her friend’s arms, hiding her blushing, happy face on the little woman’s angular shoulder.

‘Why, what have we here? What’s this? —Ah!’ perceiving Mellin. ‘So it has come to this!’

In a few words Mellin’s story was told.

‘I must write at once to the Countess,’ he said. ‘You, on your part, will publish the report of our engagement far and wide. I am forced to follow a course most repugnant to my feelings if I would save Mlle. Martello’s name from slander and profanation!’

Julie, the quick-witted, saw the whole thing at a glance. She did not greatly love Mellin, but she told herself, with a smile of grim pity, that his expiation had already begun!

‘And now I must go. I would not have the agent leave without my letter, for more than I can say. My account must reach the Countess before that scoundrel’s. She is a perfectly noble woman, but even her nobility will be better armed with facts, than only furnished with such poor arguments as she may be inspired to oppose to his coarse brutality.’

‘So soon?’ and Bianca’s triumph faded perceptibly.

‘I must.’ But not even her evident disappointment could wring professions of regret from Mellin’s unwilling lips. With a farewell, only not ceremonious, he took leave of the ladies and departed on his urgent mission.

That Bianca could no longer stay with the Perowskys was now clear. Unless she would consent to rejoin her mother, she must return to the Karishkins, and go with them for the summer to the Crimea. He would urge her, persuade her, to go home, to go to England and to her mother. At the thought of Hero, a groan almost escaped from the wretched man’s lips.

To him there seemed something horrible, revolting, in this sudden engagement to the daughter of the only woman he had so much as

ever dreamed of loving in the whole course of his barren, loveless life. It was a hideous nightmare, a waking dream, a fever of the blood ; and these fancies were but the phantasmagoria of a morbid brain.

Alas, no ! It was but too true. The secret, instinctive fear of this strange girl, which had caused him to avoid her presence, to feel uneasy in her company, to regret her acquaintance, to apprehend disaster by her means, proved truer than Reason, which had found no explanation for the distaste she inspired in him. He might have been, so far as age was concerned, her father ; pity for her mother had stayed his hand but lately, when the thought of the girl herself left him merciless. Suddenly, he saw himself, Bianca's potential murderer but a few short weeks ago, taking advantage of her importunities to choose her out of a dozen willing agents, and now—her affianced husband !

That miserable being, her husband, the husband of an unripe child, he mentally protested he would never be. ' That way,' as he told himself in plain terms, ' murder lay.' How could he call Hero ' mother,' or enter into any such unholy pact as the wretched position implied ? Nay, more, he would forbid Bianca to tell her

mother anything about this disastrous engagement for the present; and, long before there need be any question of matrimony—why——

All the women of his acquaintance, he knew, would approve, as indeed they would almost expect, that he should save Bianca from that fatal feature of Russian life, scurrilous gossip, now set rolling by the foul aspersion of Michael Perowsky's libellous tongue.

He must place her above Suspicion by the only act that could effectually shield her from the foul breath of evil report. The present provided against, the future would take care of itself!

As might have been foreseen, the Countess Perowsky was hearty in her congratulations; Julie de Kerezoff coldly approved; the Karishkins were specially sympathetic, since they really liked the girl, and she was secured by these means to them for the summer at least; and Esther Rodostamos, whose large, liberal nature had always been ready, despite Bianca's rudeness and reserve, to adopt her into the ever-widening circle of her friendship, was quite delighted to think that Mellin's solitary life would henceforth be brightened by so much youth, beauty, and accomplishment! Esther herself,

not very impressionable in the matter of lovers, admired the girl's undisguised enthusiasm, her unquestioning reverence, her implicit obedience towards this severe, silent man, so little calculated, as the world judges of such matters, to captivate the ardent fancy of an untutored nature. But Esther was leaving St. Petersburg, duty calling her to a small estate in Poland, her birthplace, the home of Chelanska.

Lord Dovedale, nothing daunted by her laughing declaration that if he persisted (as he threatened) in returning to St. Petersburg, she would close her doors against him, had already left for England. As was to be foreseen, Esther would not permit him to become the possessor of her portrait, even if Graham would have consented to sell it. 'So long as I do not give it away, and refuse to take money for it, the picture is mine,' Graham asserted; adding that Esther Rodostamos might rely upon his never disposing of it without her consent.

Graham was also on the wing. A strange uneasiness and restlessness had made him of late wonder whether his symptoms might not be attributable to a sort of unconscious nostalgia; or whether his own intense personal

loneliness came home to him more forcibly as a stranger in a strange land.

Hero had ceased even to acknowledge his notes. Late one evening, after the French play, he was waiting for a droschky to take him to a house where he expected to meet most of his friends (for this sort of informal late visiting is a familiar feature of intimate Russian intercourse), when a voice at his elbow made him turn round and sharply scrutinise the speaker.

The thin drizzling rain and greasy mud had caused the carriages taking up, to obstruct the roadway longer than usual, and some of the shabby underlings engaged about the theatre, were slipping across the road under the horses' noses in their anxiety to get home without further delay.

'*Tiens!*' cried the shrill voice that had grated on Graham's nerves, '*quel climat! C'est que je ne me permettrais la dépense d'un fiacre ce soir s'il y en avait de disponible!*' and the speaker dragged her companion backwards under the portico, as a fresh gust of wind blew the rain in their faces.

A sensation of sickness, a faint horror, a sinking of the heart kept Graham immovable.

He stood rooted to the spot, his head and face fixed as by some magic spell staring straight in front of him. It was the same voice, those were the same eyes he had seen elsewhere, and which had—he now felt—haunted and disquieted him ever since. But, if he hoped to escape by not attracting notice, he was mistaken.

A hand laid on his arm, struck a chill to his heart. Come what might he would remain silent.

‘You know me,’ said the woman; ‘you knew me before, and I should have claimed introduction to the fine ladies, whose maid you were so attentive to, but that it suited me better to wait. I am perfectly ready now. If that is your droschky I will go with you.’

Her companion, at a sign from her, discreetly fell back.

‘If you will use my droschky, and will tell the man where to take you, it is very much at your service,’ Graham answered politely.

His tone could not have been more matter of fact if he had been addressing an ordinary acquaintance.

‘Likely, isn’t it? Look here; if I don’t go with you, you must come with me. I’m not

fine enough for your grand friends, but you won't escape me so. I'm your wife, and you know it; and, what's more, you daren't deny it, for nothing can gainsay facts; and I will ask all the world, and abide by the answer,—If a man lets his wife starve whilst he fares on the best, what sort of low, mean, fellow he is——'

'Starve! Why I gave you all I had; you know I did, only reserving the price of bread and the shelter of a roof for myself; and you know on what conditions I made this sacrifice,' Graham replied, rage stinging him into the inexcusable folly of argument. 'If you have spent the money, that does not release you from the obligations you undertook. I have no further duty towards you!'

But the woman knew her power. In her lodging, whither, to escape a scene (for she was either half drunk, or recklessly excited), Graham presently accompanied her, she told him that, after spending his fortune in riot and fast living, she had got a small engagement at one of the suburban theatres in Paris. The last few years she had been living with an assistant theatrical coiffeur, and helping him in his business; she was also employed by the *costumier*.

The shabby finery, rouged cheeks, and disreputable, hardened appearance of the brazen creature smote Graham with an agonised sense of disgrace, shame, and humiliation. This female Something—to this he had sacrificed youth, fame, manhood, his ideal, his fortune, and his future happiness, and—but with a mental shudder, he drove Hero's bare idea beyond the shadowy boundary of his mind, lest so much as the thought of her should be profaned by community of association with 'the dingy satins of this female Something.'

Although generous by nature, Graham knew nothing of the maudlin sentimentality which looks with a morbid eye of unhealthy sympathy upon that class of persons whose weaknesses and wickednesses are said to make them 'nobody's enemies but their own.' If this wretched woman, who had ruthlessly sacrificed his whole life to her own cupidity and unscrupulous selfishness, had been as dear, as she was distasteful, to him, he could scarcely have acted more generously towards her than he had done. Were he to lavish a fresh fortune on her, or endeavour to reclaim, and place her under some sort of moral restraint, it would avail nothing. The master spirit of evil had

marked her for his own. The brand was upon her, and the badge of her servitude no longer inspired her with any feeling of shame. Her fierce voice, hot spirit-poisoned breath, and hard and haggard face were horrible, heart-rending, hopeless. Alternately wheedling and threatening, using flatteries or imprecations as the spirit moved her, the unhappy woman dwelt chiefly and with evident relish on her power to degrade Graham, and render further intercourse with his 'grand' friends impossible. He did not reply that the threat had lost all power, since he was on the eve of leaving St. Petersburg, but he bore her insults patiently until, from sheer exhaustion, the brazen tongue ceased its metallic discord. At last he rose to go.

'What are you going to do for me?' she asked fiercely.

'Nothing; it would be useless.'

'The law forces you to maintain me.'

'Perhaps. But we need not argue. You have had all that was mine to give. What I have earned I need now to live; it will keep me out of the workhouse as an old man.'

'You shall not go. Money I must have—and will!'

Graham had been feeling in his paletot,

and now, without answering, he turned the contents of his pockets out upon the table. Then, taking out the diamond solitaire and sleeve links, lucky accidents of evening dress, he laid them down before the woman, whose fingers were already busy, greedily clutching at the gold, and, without another word, left the room.

As he crossed the threshold she shouted after him : ‘ Since you have done this you can do more ! ’ but he hastily drew the door behind him into the lock, eager to escape, to shake off the degradation of her dwelling, to breathe a purer air after the foul and vitiated atmosphere of vice and greed.

Not for her sake was the costly gift bestowed, alas ! no, but for her womanhood’s sake. Lost, degraded, doomed as she now was, she had once shared with the bright and beautiful of her sex, in that fair prerogative, to which every manly man involuntarily does willing homage.

Graham made no further adieux.

He left the city of the Neva without saying farewell to any of his friends. But England no longer held any attractions for him. This encounter with the spectre of his ruined youth

made him shrink from the idea of a meeting with Hero, and in his dark and despairing mood he determined for the present to hold himself aloof from his kind, and to see what balm a summer's wandering might bring to his bruised spirit.

CHAPTER XLVII.

‘A CHARMED LIFE.’

THE impulse towards education and enlightenment, which had produced such extraordinary and rapid development in Russia during the earlier part of the century, had in the last twenty years entirely lost its original character—that of cultivated Liberalism, pure and simple—to assume a complicated and complex aspect, troublesome and depressing to many of its original adherents.

Mellin, a Nihilist of the old original type, though nearer forty than fifty, was yet old enough to regret the old formulæ of Liberal faith, and to despair over the conflicting elements of modern development.

A great foreign statesman—the greatest statesman of the day—had proclaimed his conviction to whomsoever had ears to hear, or a mind to understand, that the ‘Latin races were played out!’

Since Pan-Teutonism was a future not to be tamely contemplated by antagonistic races, Pan-Slavism must be opposed to Prussia's arrogant political programme; and forthwith, a watch-word resounded from north to south, from east to west, and a propaganda was initiated to carry the gospel of race, and resistance, to the remotest Slavonic tribe, and to preach the new doctrine of Slavophilism with energetic protest.

If the Latin races really were played out, so much the more reason, in the absence of potential alliances with alien peoples, that the doctrine of Blood and Brotherhood should be proclaimed to the remotest provinces, where the Slav ran the danger of succumbing to the Teuton!

The new doctrinaires dwelt with emphasis on the fact that the enmity between Russ and Pole was a factitious enmity, an artificial, incidental antagonism; that the rival creeds of Rome and Byzantium, the opposing Greek and Latin culture, the alphabets and literatures which had been used to foment old grievances and to widen old breaches, were, in fact, as nothing, mere unimportant matters of detail, compared with the one significant, dominant,

and all-embracing truth of a common Slav origin !

It was whispered that the heir to the throne was strongly Slavophil in his sentiments ; and, since all heirs are popularly supposed to vote secretly with the Opposition, the brighter and better side of the movement, that patriotic and loyal following which made pride of nationality, and faith to their own country and people a *sine quâ non*, declared triumphantly that they had the full sympathy of the coming Ruler, who, from obvious motives of policy, was obliged for the present to hold his tongue.

But with the cry of ‘ Russia for the Russians ! ’ a new complication arose.

Former sovereigns, recognising the impossibility of moving the apathetic spirit of the people to spontaneous development, had invited foreign aid to the initiation and perfection of civilised arts. The overseers of all great landed estates were German ; industry, intelligence, order, and conscience, were required in agricultural pursuits as well as in the complex divisions and sub-division of public offices, where the German system had to be inaugurated and kept going by well-trained German bureaucrats, indoctrinated with those principles

of phenomenal punctuality and pig-tail parsimony which had enabled the Great little Frederick to leave his heirs and assigns the rare and inestimable legacy of a flourishing exchequer, in spite of the Seven Years' War.

It was a well-known fact that in preceding reigns, Germans had been invited to immigrate, under specially favourable conditions; and the Baltic provinces, swarming with a mixed population, pointed to the successful results of imported civilisation. That which could not be cultivated from within, must be imported from without. Posts in the army, the navy, the admiralty, at Court, and in the numerous public offices, were all largely held by men of German origin. In many instances the patronymic alone testified to the fact of Teutonic descent—the family established three or four generations back on Russian soil, having become both by birthright and in feeling loyally Russian—yet the long smouldering jealousy of the predominance of the Teutonic element in the State, needed but the new cry of the Slavophile party, and what had been a negative grievance, a passive injury, became a positive outrage, and an active wrong, with those clamourers whose watchword was 'Russia for the Russians!'

Moscow, always regarded with veneration by the true Muscovite—the proverb says, ‘Petersburg is my pride, but Moscow holds my heart’—as the head-quarters of the Slavophile party, with Akasow at its head, was looked upon by the neo-politicians as the true Capital; whilst the comparatively modern growth of St. Petersburg, with its concession to western ideas, was contemptuously spoken of as a place for foreigners, a Russian Paris, where a hybrid civilisation, and the compromise of all that was purely Russian, had wiped out the distinctive features of national life.

The execrated *Tchinovik* or organised officialism, the bugbear of Russian hatred, stank doubly in the popular nostrils, now that the Oppressor was explained to be twice a traitor; first as the blood-sucker, tax-collector, and tyrant of the poor; secondly as an alien and a foreigner; a greedy German, battenning on Russian blood and fattening on Russian money!

Immensely popular amongst urban populations were coarse caricatures of bloated German officials, seated on swelling money-bags, and clutching eagerly at the contents of the poor *moujik's* pockets, as, attenuated and dejected, their unresisting victim pathetically turns those

receptacles inside out, in propitiation of the greedy and rapacious monster, whilst a mongrel figure, half-policeman, half-soldier, waves the threatening knout in the background.

Thus Teutophobia, side by side with Slavophilism, had added complications to the original programme, not dreamed of in earlier Nihilistic philosophy.

Bakounine was dead, Herzen was dead, Tchernichevski was dead (or buried in the gloomy profound of the Siberian mines). Belinski, who belonged to the literary group including Granowski the historian, Tourgunieff the novelist and poet, Prince Tscherkassi, and half a dozen more, seemed to Mellin, in his profound discouragement, to belong to the Past; whilst in the two Akasows and their associate Kalkow he believed that he discerned the men of the immediate Future; men with whose names the Nihilistic 'new departure' would be associated; men capable of inspiring the masses of their countrymen with something positive, something tangible, something constructive—as for example, this new gospel of Slavophilism, in opposition to the nearly exploded negative doctrines of Nihilism, represented by the older party, to which Mellin himself belonged.

To destroy *may* gratify the brute instincts of insensate 'red-fool fury;' to create *must* flatter the eternal aspirations of progressive humanity! And side by side with this new doctrine of the glorification of Race, the propagandist taught with pronounced carelessness 'of the single life,' enthusiastic 'carefulness' of the type.

Again, the 'cloud no bigger than a man's hand,' which Esther Rodostamos's keen vision (inherited perhaps from generations of prophets and seers) had discerned on the social horizon, had been silently growing and gathering strength; and rumours of persecution and outrage from outlying provinces, of fearful atrocities practised upon the Jewish communities by the bigoted and ignorant peasant populations, were confirmed by appeals to the State for protection, on the part of a long-suffering, much-enduring, peaceable people, and by symptoms of resentment and threatened reprisals.

Under these circumstances, it was scarcely to be wondered at that Mellin should find the weight of his disastrous betrothal oppress him to the point of despondency, or that it should superinduce in him an attitude of mind which, if calm at all, was 'a calm despair.'

The natural melancholy of the Russian, pervading as it does the songs and tales of the people, their physical attitude and facial expression, is only not despair because in its idleness and apathy it assumes an enduring, patient character, deeply pathetic to the looker-on.

The Nihilist goes to death as the Fakeer Fatalist, as the pious Buddhist. He has none of the rapturous visions of the warrior's paradise, with black-eyed girls in the garb of Houris, beckoning him to the reward of material joys, such as inspire the Mussulman soldier, dashing into the thick of the fight, with the cry of '*Allah il Allah!*' on his lips; but he has settled, calm, and supreme contempt of Death, which it were shame inexpressible for him, through any terror of the weakened flesh to belie.

The Nihilist's first dogma is that his life is not his own. Not his own to use, though it be in the service of his 'Cause'; not his own to regret, if it be required of him. And, of all the thousands of misguided martyrs, who have trodden the painful Calvary of a political faith, which death alone could expiate, not one has ever been known to disgrace himself or his

Cause by betrayal of its secrets, or his accomplices ; by appeals for mercy, or by cowardly compromise.

To-day it is a General, erewhile covered with Orders and decorations, who suffers the 'happy despatch' secretly in the courtyard of a prison. To-morrow a naval captain is led out to die, and whilst he looks at his former comrades—it may be his own familiar friend whose lot it is, to give the word of command that shall lodge a volley in the offender's breast, it is not *his* eye that quails, or *his* cheek that blanches, as the hesitating words, faltered forth by pallid lips, send a human soul fluttering into Eternity, and a moment hence, make the doomed man but a memory and a name. Next week a batch of students expiate the crime of high treason, and go smiling to their doom, in the belief that from the ground their blood will cry aloud for justice and reform. They die that others may live, and they see no injustice or cruelty in their lot. A man suspected—as has happened, ere now, in Nihilistic annals—of being a traitor to his Cause, knows that the suspicion, alone, signs his death-warrant ; and he dies without a word of remonstrance, believing silence to be the only expiation for treachery !

To Bianca, now spending a pleasant summer with the Karishkins, on their Crimean estates, Mellin was able to write by trusty messengers such news as might fully have accounted for his letters bearing so little resemblance to those of a lover. But Bianca would not have had it otherwise. The endearments and protestations of vulgar lovers would have seemed to her out of place. Mellin should never step down from his pedestal by her means, nor would she ever trouble his lofty ends and aims with petty personal reproaches, or the carping exactions of a narrow personal vanity, born of the desire for adulation. To her mother her tone had insensibly altered.

Though not at liberty, as she believed, to reveal the secret of her happiness, she could not disguise the feeling glowing at her heart, the triumphant sense of joyous fulfilment, which made every day so many hours of summer sunshine, of delight, wonder, and gratitude.

The Karishkins, informed by their father of Bianca's enthusiasm, courage, and sacrifices to the 'Cause,' saw in her a sort of heroine; and the Princess Paul, with her natural tact and native amiability, was never tired of telling the young girl tales of Mellin's splendid

services, hair-breadth escapes, and unselfish devotion to the work of his life. 'It was thought he must have had some unlucky love affair, or some secret attachment,' the princess said one day. 'To you, my dear, belongs the sole honour of a conquest, no one else had the courage to undertake.'

Thus the autumn slipped tranquilly away, and the opening days of winter found them once more in St. Petersburg.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

'OF THE RACE OF RURIK.'

'THEY tell me that you are a traitor,' said Mellin, looking at Helena Perowska with a half-smile in his sad blue eyes.

'Not even a traitress?' she asked, her frank soul, speaking through her countenance, saying more than mere words could do. Then, earnestly enough—'there is nothing worse; and you, Serge Constantinovitch, what do you think?'

'I know you, Helena Paulovna.'

'For the rest—I am of the race of Rurik,' she said proudly. 'Traitors and traitresses grow not on that stem.' She apparently did not think it worth while to exculpate herself. Nor did Mellin seem to expect it.

'They say, moreover, and I fear more truly, Helena Paulovna, that you are a bigot. They even whisper that you seek dispensation from

other vows, in those of the cloister. It is reported that within Moscow's walls the convent may be found, which is the goal of your aspirations.'

'We Russians cannot afford to speak ill of convents, Serge Constantinovitch; it is like modern ingratitude to forget, or ignore, the fact that the convents of Moscow became palaces and fortresses, when secular ruin threatened the city, and when the yellow hordes of the Tartars of the Khanates, swept in devastating masses over the country. Then all were ready to rush for safety and for succour to the convents; whence later on, deliverance, alike from the Mongols and the Poles, was destined to come, at last. The convents, as asylums of our hereditary nobility, not only furnished warriors and leaders of men, they were the refuge of arts and learning; and these survived, to blossom forth again in happier times, and to prove us something less, or more, than the mere outer barbarians which Western civilisation pronounces us to be.'

'Aptly argued, Helena Paulovna, but beside the mark. The cloister is not for you. We cannot spare you. Your work is in the world. Prior claims demand your attention.'

'My work is in the world. You have said

it, Serge Constantinovitch. I acknowledge it. The rest is mere idle gossip : unworthy of comment.' Mellin, with a wave of the hand, passed on to other matters.

In a few words he opened the subject upon which he had come prepared to speak to her. 'I sent you the address,' he said, 'because you, who know Him best, who know him as none other can, his weak points and his strong ones (if any), know the arguments most likely to tell, the sentiments that will appeal to his pride, generosity, candour, or vanity—you could at your own discretion so alter and modify the paper as to drive the nail of argument up to the head, straight home as it were, so as to fix it in his very heart.'

'Is it not a hackneyed means of appeal? Has it not been tried, ineffectually, again and again in the past?'

'Who shall say "ineffectually" Helena Paulovna? Who can tell what random word may pierce the thick crust of apathy, selfishness, and indifference that interested place-hunters and wily courtiers have encouraged to creep over the spent volcano, that was once a heart? Why—would you believe it?—they are going about inches taller, with their noses in the air,

arrogantly repeating the fulsome flattery which they have not scrupled to deaden their Master's conscience withal. They declare that He bears a charmed life, and, in proof, they point to the frustrated attempts of would-be assassins. They assert that Cæsar is invulnerable; and that special interposition of Providence paralyses the hand, and sends the bullet astray, which deferred Hope aims at Oppression and Tyranny. Late events have had a disastrous effect. A murmur means banishment, to the murmurer; reform, whether political or social, is declared to be evidently superfluous, since the Higher Powers protect and approve, the *status quo*. The civilisation of Russia is relegated to the indefinite future; liberal and progressive changes can no longer be looked for.'

'Even our rulers are not immortal, Serge Constantinovitch. We must look to the tranquil evolution of Nature, which in due course brings daily nearer the consummation that cannot be long delayed. We must possess our souls in patience, and wait.'

'You mean for the coming Kaiser? No, no, Helena Paulovna; our great national failing, our Eastern apathy, our Asiatic indolence, the *ljenj* which underlies all social grades from

prince to peasant, misleads us here. We must not wait. On the contrary, we must act, and that without delay.'

'I do not say "No!" I am at your orders. I am willing to obey. But, as between friends, let me ask you one thing, Serge Constantino-vitch; and you, on your side, answer me truly. Have not the measures of Reform already accorded, been enough? Is not the fault rather with the Executive? In what western country have more, and more radical, changes taken place, during the last five-and-twenty years, than in ours? Think of the emancipation of the Serfs! Recall the bitter animosities that grew out of that innovation, and broke into open enmity on the very steps of the throne! Remember the discontent of the landed proprietors, of the nobility, of the government officials, whose interests were bound up in a prolongation of the agrarian situation, and the immense sums lavished in compensation, to the clamourers who pleaded injured interests! I, who witnessed only the "after-math," the later crop of that harvest of opposition and indifference, who noted the estrangement of old and valued servants of the Crown, the coldness of personal friends, the criticism of

all classes, I can testify to the fact, that not even gratitude for the noblest gift man can give, or ever gave, his fellow men, recompensed the generous initiative, that was taken, alone and, practically, carried out unaided ! The class, the only class benefited, neither asked for freedom, nor cared for it. They did not even know what to do with it. They do not know at this very hour ! The old habit, tradition, and tone cling to the people, as a garment. The Russian peasant needs (and loves) a master. His subservience is an instinct, not an agony, as reformers would have us believe. As between friends, frankly, am I right, Serge Constantinovitch ?’

‘No ! You were too near to the chief actor in those scenes, Helena Paulovna, to judge fairly. History will tell later generations—and tell them truly, that Russia’s great reform of 1861, was no act of Imperial beneficence, or enlightened humanity, but a concession extorted by the dread of a general peasant insurrection, such as our *poselenia* (colonised Propaganda) is preaching now to the besotted agricultural populations ! Thus, you see I do not endorse your views, Helena Paulovna.’

‘You can scarcely disagree with me as to the question of army-reform ? Was that a mea-

sure easily carried? Why, General Miloutine was opposed by the whole military council, the Princes Imperial at their head! Those reforms, conceived in the noblest spirit of enlightenment, were calculated to form (it might be slowly but surely) the kernel of that civilisation, which since the time of Peter the Great, we have acknowledged as our greatest need. But I ask you, as friend asks friend, what thanks had He, who braved the storm of exasperated opposition, of open abuse, and secret disaffection? General Miloutine knew his enemies. Their name was Legion; and his Master knew that for every enemy of the general's he could reckon a score of his own. Do I speak the truth, Serge Constantinovitch?'

'As between friends——you do, Helena Paulovna.'

'We are children! the nation is childish! A new toy, a new religion, a new scheme, a new political leader, a new French idiom, and we are only too eager to adopt it! We are unripe for change, unfit to govern ourselves; we preach a propaganda for which the peasant has no heart and no mind. You paint his wrongs to him in glaring colours, he listens apathetically, thinking you a madman, and he bears

with you patiently, believing you to be drunk ; but one day *vodki* kills his patience, he falls upon and beats you, and binds you with bonds and carries you before the governor of your province, and denounces you. In the towns, I do not say but there is agitation, discontent, rebellion ; but our towns constitute only a tenth of the entire population—(only one-tenth of which is able to read and write !)—and most of these so-called Towns are only large villages miles upon miles apart ! But, taking the real Towns, those for instance of 10,000 or 15,000 inhabitants,—they form only four or five per cent. of the entire population, *i.e.* about three or four millions *all told*. The Government, which has under its orders the military contingent of the entire population, that is, 1,200,000 soldiers (to say nothing of police), can transform the five or six principal towns, the only places where any movement on a large scale is possible, into very military camps, as indeed they are ! That is common sense, Serge Constantinovitch !’

‘ You forget, Helena Paulovna, that disaffection undermines the army in all its grades and ranks. You forget that the entire garrisons of several of our fortresses are gained over, that the co-operation of the jailers is secured, and that

prisoners communicate with us, unsuspected by the governors of Prisons.'

'And still, I declare my belief that all agitation is premature, unwise, futile. In many cases what does it amount to? To petty vanity, personal discontents, a restless desire for change, an idle trust in some chance, some miracle called "regeneration." But the nation, the homogeneous mass that stands behind the throne—the thirty-six compact millions of men—they have no understanding for your revolution, no sympathy with your clamours. These doctrines, they say, are good for a few *têtes montées*, hysterical students, emancipated women, swaggers and vain boasters; but the Nation, the good Russian nation, knows nothing of such innovations! Look you, Serge Constantinovitch! Alexander II. gave liberty to 22,000,000 peasants. In 1860 there were 1,260 kilomètres of iron roads; in 1879, there were 21,870 kilomètres of railroad. In 1860 there was only one, that is, the State Bank, in Russia; there are now three hundred and fourteen banks, besides one hundred "credit" companies and twenty-one hypothecated banks. In 1852 there were eighty-two public companies, with shareholders and boards of directors, and a

gross capital of sixty-four millions of roubles ; at the present moment there are five hundred such companies, disposing of a capital of 3,235,000 of roubles !’

‘ You have a good memory, Helena Paulovna.’

‘ Nay, I do not trust to memory ; these are facts, authenticated, substantiated facts,’ she answered, laying a paper on the table beside him, ‘ look and judge for yourself. We are so apt to take all good things for granted, that it is only justice towards our enemies, if now and again, we look at the other side of the question. Bare and bald as my list is, you will agree that these facts have their significance, and ought, if we are honest, to temper our jeremiads.’

‘ I confess that the beginning was hopeful.’

‘ The beginning ? And the middle ? Why, to deny their merit is to offer me—me—a cruel insult. Did I not, day and night, week, month and year, plead the people’s cause ? And did I ever meet with a rebuff, a cold, hasty, impatient answer, reproof or ridicule ? Never ! The whole nature of the Man, deeply impressed with the poverty of a despotism that chose Death rather than Defeat, in an unrighteous cause, was full of noble aspirations, of

generous initiative, of unselfish daring. No, no, Serge Constantinovitch ; the years have fled and each has taken something on its wings ; some trust betrayed, some hope deferred, some affection outraged, some service ignored, some wound unhealed ; and disappointment, ingratitude, loneliness, misunderstanding, discouragement, have done their melancholy work. Not even the eagle always soars ! As he flies at the rising sun, fearless and free, the servile world applauds the daring feat to the echo. He is the king of birds ! But pluck the strong feathers from his wing, peck persistently at his aspiring heart, forget your heartening pæans of praise, and, with drooping crest and vision dimmed, he misses his mark, and blindly reels to ruin !'

In her excitement Helena Perowska stopped short before Mellin, and sweeping the curtain from the window, looked up at the eastern heavens.

It was almost as though she expected to verify her vision in the skies.

There was a pause.

'And you,' said Mellin, 'you—justify him !'

'The word is well chosen, Serge Constantinovitch. I—justify——'

'That is—you are generous ; you——'

‘No, no,’ she said hastily, and as if weary of the subject. ‘There is no need for generosity ; only a demi-god could do what we expect of One weak Man. I do as I would be done by, that is all, and I hate injustice. For the rest, I am a mere instrument—a tool. I have not to think ; I have only to obey. The proof? Well, it is here. Shall I read it to you? I have not altered your rough draft much,’ and she took a paper from the folds of her bodice.

‘It is well. Proceed, Helena Paulovna,’ Mellin replied, with evident relief ; ‘I am all attention.’

And without further preamble she began :—

‘Arise, O Russia ! a by-word and a reproach amongst the nations, devoured by enemies, ruined by slavery, shamefully oppressed, and vilely sold by the baseness and treachery of those who eat thy bread ! Awake from thy long sleep of ignorance, indolence and apathy. Arise, O Russia ! and awaken the successor of the Tartar Khans, and stand erect before the throne of the Oppressor, and demand of Him a reckoning for the national misfortunes ! Tell him, speak boldly the words of truth, and tell him that his throne is not the altar of the All

Powerful, and that the Almighty wills no longer that we should be slaves. All the Russias, O Tzar, had confided to thee the supreme power, and thou wert as a god upon earth to the waiting nations that called thee Father and Lord. And what has been their reward? Blinded by pride and power, deafened by the adulations of wicked men, thou hast forgotten Russia, thy mother-country, thy child. Thou hast consumed thy life in inventing uniforms, in designing buttons, in counting Thy battalions, in reviewing troops, in smelling pipe-clay, in prancing on parade-grounds, a military masquerader, whilst the World has wondered! The stranger and the alien suck thy children's blood. Dismiss the Teuton traitor from thy court and councils. The rapacious *Tchinovik* (official world) grind the faces of thy patient poor, and gloat over the groans of the starving and the sick. The despicable censors of a fettered press, in obsequious and servile devotion, blot, burn, and silence the prayers and murmurs of thy patient and long-suffering people. The voice of truth is not allowed to penetrate the purple chambers of thy palaces or trouble thy repose! No faintest echo of her sacred accents can reach thy ears. Thou hast

buried her. Thou hast rolled a mighty stone before the door of her sepulchre, and a body-guard of thy gallooned and gilded slaves keep watch and ward before her grave. And Thou, dreamer, thou dreamest that she is dead, and thou believest that, for her, there is no resurrection ! But she only sleeps ! Once again she comes forth and moves amongst the quick ; her loins girded, her lamp in her hand ; and its rays fall far and wide and illumine the benighted, and show the Universe the darkness of thy people, and the thick darkness of the nations. Advance, O Tzar, and take thy stand at the bar of eternal justice ; there to be judged by history, by posterity, by thy fellow-men and by One mightier than thou ! Widows cry to thee for their husbands ; mothers clamour for their sons ; maidens shriek in horror at the slaughter of their lovers ; the fatherless stretch forth lean arms and hungry hands ; thousands of lives are made waste and desolate, thousands of homes empty ; millions—faint with surrounding carnage—drench the battle-plains with their own useless blood. Not yet is it too late ! Not yet. Pause and consider. Bow down thy crowned crest ; lay low thy proud forehead in the dust ; seek wisdom amongst the wise ones

of the earth ; implore pardon, promise peace ; bind up the wounds of thy bleeding people, ameliorate their poverty, mitigate their suffering ; give them the light they crave ; throw thyself upon their heart ; throw thyself upon their mercy ; let not thy creatures reign longer in thy stead ; but learn at last, or recall to thy memory, O Tzar, what it is to meet Humanity on equal grounds, no longer the Despot of slaves, but a Man amongst Men !'

There was a pause.

A bright spot of colour burned on Helena's cheek. She laid the manuscript aside.

'It is well,' Mellin asserted ; 'you know admirably how to obey. But I do not recognise in this address, the spirit of argument and opposition that marked your opening utterances.'

'I am a tool, Serge Constantinovitch. I have no will of my own, no opinions. I have but to obey.'

The silent plains of Semonow, the vast horizon that met her wistful gaze, the stillness and seclusion of a life that had the monotony, if not the obvious restrictions, of the cloister, had not been without their effect on Helena Perowska's mind.

She had not revisited the place since, a

bewildered bride, she had been surprised by a visit that was fated to change the whole course of her destiny. Her agent had carried out the instructions she had given him, and this was the reason of her presence, after many years, on the abandoned estate. A hospital which she had caused to be erected was now finished. New schools were also completed, and her chief business and interest, during the past months had been, to find proper persons to bring the whole into working order. For this purpose she had applied to a noble lady at the head of a religious house in St. Petersburg, and, in response to her appeal, Sister Anastasia and a younger lady-probationer had been sent out to Semonow.

Sister Anastasia and Helena had not met since the memorable evening, when they had both bidden farewell to their sainted Sovereign lady; but nothing could have been more consonant with the Countess's wishes, or more sympathetic to her frame of mind. She had not permitted herself the act of voluntarism implied by asking for any special person to help her, and she therefore looked upon Sister Anastasia's advent, as a signal favour.

Their busy days still left the two women

time for many a talk ; and the Sister, imperfectly acquainted with the Countess Perowska's history, believing her to be only a neglected and childless wife, and seeing her devoted to her religious duties, thought it no harm, in her own gentle way, to place the religious life before her hostess in its most attractive light.

Chancing on the question of vows, Helena asked her gentle visitant, if in her opinion one sort of vow were more specially binding than another ? and whilst the Sister deprecated all responsibility in her answer, and suggested that the Countess should consult one more calculated to give a just opinion than herself, she added that to her appreciation, the vows to dedicate oneself to a religious life, and vows to the dead, laid on the soul more special and binding obligations than any others.

'Then,' said her hostess, 'the one prevents my ever making the other. I mean,' she added, as Sister Anastasia looked up questioningly, 'I mean that a vow made to the dead binds me to remain in the world as long as I, or, at any rate, as long as another Person lives. In the World I might be useful ; out of it I could do nothing—in that special direction, I mean.'

To Mellin she had spoken frankly; there was no cause for reticence with him, and every reason for honesty. But, once a freemason always a freemason. There are words that cannot be unspoken, bonds that cannot be unbound, obligations that must be respected. It was perfectly understood between them that, whereas, with the impetuosity and scorn born of unworthy treatment, and the revulsion of feeling springing from treachery, the Countess had formerly volunteered for, nay, insisted on, her right to any dangerous or difficult service—she now renounced all active participation in certain combinations, and restricted herself to the dissemination of Liberal ideas, the spread of education, the amelioration of the working classes, and an endeavour to check and expose the rapacity, frauds, and peculations rampant amongst a class of official nobodies who waxed proud, and grew fat, grinding the faces of the poor.

Many of the affiliated ladies had no other functions, and aimed at no greater results than these. The ‘enthusiasm of humanity,’ as shown in the cultus of the rich idle, for the poor toilers, was in Helena’s case heightened by the tenets of a strict orthodoxy, and intensified by a devout

worship of the precepts of Brotherhood divinely instituted by the Great Communist.

During the silence and solitude of her sojourn at Semonow, Helena had arrived, by slow degrees, at the calmness of conviction.

There had been a blustering attempt, on Count Michael's part, to give his version of the story of Bianca's engagement; but though his wife listened quietly, and offered no comments, he felt, by the gravity of her manner, that his story was disbelieved, and that she only did not contradict it, because she judged the matter unworthy discussion.

Pondering deeply on the atonement to the Dead to which her vows pledged her, Helena Perowska grew to contemplate her own past injuries as insignificant indeed, in comparison with those silently endured by her august mistress.

She, who had given heirs to the Crown, who had been the Mother of her adopted people, as well as of her family, had borne desertion, indifference, and solitude without a sign, only redoubling her deeds of charity and her intercessions on His behalf, upon whose shoulders lay the heavy burthen of national discontent, the reproach of the disregarded

murmurs of his exasperated people at unrepented abuses, and the moral responsibility of a state of things for which, upon her knees, the gentle Lady never ceased to implore divine mercy.

Many a noble trait of her gentle Mistress's character came back to Helena Perowska which, contrasted with her own unrighteous spirit of revenge, shone with a yet purer lustre.

On one occasion, when a more than usually painful scandal had reached the ears of the Imperial Recluse, She had sent for the victim of it, and had begged Him for the unvarnished truth, adding : ' It must be less terrible than these wicked reports. Give me, I beseech you, the opportunity of defending you.' Touched and abashed by such generous delicacy, her faithless spouse burst into tears, exclaiming as He did so, in the first impulse of a purely sentimental contrition : ' There is no second such noble nature as yours, in the whole world of women,' offering forthwith to renounce the fancy of the moment, and put an end to the scandal created by the *liaison*.

' Let the sacrifice be made to God, and then I, too, will accept it,' was the reply. The unhappy Lady had no faith in the stability

of an impulse, not founded on principle; she dared not accept the proffered renunciation unless made upon the highest grounds. Self was dead in her; and those who knew her best asserted that for many years past she no longer prayed for herself, but only for Him, whose weaknesses made him the unconscious tool of intrigue, the unhappy, irresponsible instrument of designing and ambitious men, and unscrupulous women.

Thus, with Helena Perowska, allegiance to the Dead was doubly insured by new-found humility born of self-condemnation and repentance.

The new year found her established for the winter in her St. Petersburg quarters.

A hush, and a distrust of all things and all men pervaded the city.

People lived quietly, festivities were few, many families were in mourning for the victims of the late war, the financial situation was one of great embarrassment, the political horizon troubled. Men of avowed Liberal principles had, to the disgust of the old Conservative party, been drawn into the Imperial councils; a popular general was entrusted with an important public post; another friend of Progress,

the chosen companion of Akasow's counsels, was advanced to a position of grave responsibility. It was said that the Heir to the Throne, shut up in his palace, marked his sense of disapproval of things in general, by holding aloof; whilst it was added that the two appointments in the Imperial Household, had comprised at once a bid for the popular suffrages, and the tentative advance of an unhappy Father, in the direction of a critical and recalcitrant Son.

People reckoned upon their fingers how many attempts had been made against the life of One who appeared to bear a charmed existence.

It was whispered that if the fatal number of seven were passed, the Sovereign would die quietly in his bed. In 1866 the ex-student Karakoff had fired a futile shot; the pistol had been dashed aside by a St. Petersburg workman, Kommissaroff by name. The following year, Berezowski, a Pole, discharged a revolver at the Emperor, but the bullet lodged itself in one of the chargers of the body-guard; in 1879, whilst taking his morning 'constitutional,' the Russian ruler was attacked by Solovieff, whose four bullets all missed their aim, and landed the marksman on the gallows. Then

the undermined railroad had been the scene of a disaster which left the Emperor unscathed; and finally the attempt to blow up the Winter Palace had resulted in the death of a few work-people, and several soldiers of the Préobajenski Regiment, leaving the Imperial family intact. Thus, according to the speaker's political proclivities, men were wont to see either a fate deferred, to be accomplished finally with a sevenfold conviction of the righteousness of the assassin's Cause, or a signal mark of the Divine interposition of Providence, rendering null, void, and of no effect, these attempts to destroy the Lord's Anointed; and resulting, invariably, in the death of the would-be regicides.

But, whilst his constitutional melancholy daily increased, the old and faithful servants about his person had reason to deplore an ever growing recklessness and impatience in their august Master. Mysterious communications, warning him not to go here or there, were daily deposited upon his breakfast-table. He refused to alter his plans, he persisted in disregarding the warnings, and he sternly forbade any change of programme. It was as though he too shared in that popular belief of a charmed life; or as

if, like the royal sage of old, his conviction of the vanity of all things, and the abiding vexation of spirit that must endure so long as life should last, left him as unmoved as the 'sad and splendid' Ecclesiast, by 'Folly, Fortune, Glory, Ruin!'

Bianca and the Karishkins, Julie de Kerezoff (now almost entirely estranged by a growing difference of opinion from a husband she adored, and whose want of zeal made her tremble for his future), and Helena Perowska met again on the eve of the new year.

Mellin was absent on some mysterious mission.

He alone possessed the secret, and the technical skill, which produced those Nihilist-passports, the marvel of experts of all nations. He had the patience necessary to the manufacture not only of Russian papers, but the passports of almost every European *Chancellerie*. Down to the seals and stamps complete, the Foreign Office paraphernalia was so perfect that not even the most experienced and wary detective could discern the forgery.

He made long and costly journeys, penetrated prison-walls, supplied so-called 'illegal' men with documents that carried them safely

across the frontier, and smiled to think these months, as was fitting, would prove the busiest and most active of his life.

He did not write, even to Bianca, but he had had one brief interview with her before leaving St. Petersburg. He bade her hold herself in readiness for future orders, and amongst other things (to be remembered by her as strangely significant hereafter) he desired her to have two disguises ready, in case of need; one, the complete garb of a Sister of charity; the other, a correct peasant costume such as is worn by the women of Little Russia.

Esther Rodostamos wrote to her friends that she should remain in Poland until after Easter, but that her faithful Chelanska would probably be in St. Petersburg some time during the winter, to look after matters connected with the hotel on the Wassily-Ostrow.

In the outer world it was confidently asserted that the Nihilist plotters had, for the present, abandoned all active designs, and, placing faith in the programme and promises of the Liberal party, were content to bide their time, preaching a propaganda of Panslavism, pointing to a coalition of forces with the moderate Liberals and the party of Progress, at

the not very distant date (according to optimist calculations) when the Emperor, weary of the burthen of power, would resign his sceptre and lay down his crown, abdicating in favour of the Heir to the Throne, who was popularly reported to be sulking behind four walls.

CHAPTER XLIX.

‘ TO-MORROW.’

Two pages and a gentleman of the bed-chamber were whiling away the waning afternoon with a game of three-handed whist. A chamberlain with his gold key of office, and an air of impatient offence, was recounting, for their benefit and to his own growing ill-humour, the order of precedence to be observed on occasion of a *fête* to take place on the day but one following. The nasal tone of his shrill, harsh voice was interrupted by the entrance of the Emperor's old and trusty body-servant, whose many years of faithful service made him a privileged individual, free to address any members of the suite without waiting for recognition from his superiors. He spoke a few hurried words in a low tone to the chamberlain. The whist players, too much absorbed in their game, paid no attention to what was passing on the other side of the room.

‘She refuses to leave. I have assured her that I myself cannot say when our Master will return. She says she will wait; that she will take no denial; that time is of no consequence to her; she frankly says she will not go.’

‘And she has the sign and countersign?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hm! She could not know these unless—a lady, you say—she is veiled?’

‘As thickly as a nun. She wears some costly gems; she drew off her glove to offer me one——’

‘What, a bribe? That looks suspicious.’

‘By no means; a ring which she begged me to carry to our Imperial Master.’

‘Let me see it.’

‘Nay. I refused the message, since I knew Him to be absent, and I did not care to have the costly toy even for a minute in my possession.’

The chamberlain frowned. ‘You were wrong,’ he said; ‘it might have given me a clue. No matter; you will not let her pass. If she absolutely refuses to go, I suppose she must remain in the ante-room, but on no account let her out of your sight,’ and he passed out.

An hour later the Imperial sleigh dashed

through the darkness up to a side entrance of the Winter Palace.

The weather was bitterly cold, and the sleigh bells rang sharp and clear on the frosty, windless air. Another quarter of an hour and the faithful old servant admitted the closely-veiled lady to his Imperial Master's presence. As the door closed behind her, there was a moment's pause ; then, advancing to where the Emperor stood, self-possessed, calm, upright, and stern, she drew aside her veil.

'You !—You !!' He exclaimed, visibly staggered and almost recoiling, as he spoke. She made no effort to kneel, or to kiss the Imperial hand ; she had come not to ask a boon, but to confer one ; not to condone a wrong, but to pardon many. The Woman counted for nothing in her act ; the Christian for everything. As a Ruler, she could not respect the Sovereign who, beginning with fair promises and yet fairer performances, had broken with the pledges of his early life, and had signally failed to fulfil the programme of his prime. As a Man, she respected him still less. A cold husband, a cruel lover, a faithless spouse, a fickle friend, it had cost him nothing to forget the devotion of years, and to sacrifice her to

the caprice of an idle fancy. Her judgment of him was implacable. But, as a Christian woman, acknowledging herself a sinner, by the memory of the One sinned against, by the loyalty due to the Dead, in expiation of a faulty Past, she acknowledged a duty towards, and she could pity Him still! She would debase herself by none of the lying, conventional forms which may conveniently cover the basest hypocrisies, the most flagrant infidelity; she, the injured woman, would speak to Him, her injurer, as upon an equal platform with himself; she would raise herself above him by forgiveness of the injuries which she had never stooped to bewail.

‘Yes, it is I, Alexander Nicolaievitch!’ she said, speaking simply without ceremonial prefix, as ‘Imperial Majesty,’ ‘Sovereign,’ or ‘Sire’; ‘no personal end could have moved me to this. I hoped never to show my face to you again. I am here, not for your sake, nor for mine, but for the sake of Her that is gone; for Her sake who, now a saint in Heaven, forgives the past, and watches over you, your guardian angel still! Upon Her death-bed I pledged her my oath to warn you, if your life, to my knowledge, should be in danger. That

was the only expiation of my sins I could make, and—at the cost of more than I care to tell, or than there is need for you to know—I made it. That hour has come: you are in danger now, and there is no time to be lost. I risk my own life to save yours. Nay, no thanks; I do it for Her sake. She had a right to my life, and I offer it gladly in expiation of the past. Every minute that I stay here, increases my danger, for I am watched. I have been waiting for you already two hours. Will you give me your word to do as I ask you, that I may go at once?’ She spoke as to an equal; even not without some subtle hint of authority, as betrayed by the urgency of her tone and commanding words.

‘I thank you. No.’

‘What? You refuse? You let me take so desperate a step, run such a risk in vain? You have no choice; you must obey. A voice speaks to you from the dead; nay, more, it is a voice from Heaven whose warning you dare not disregard. In answer to Her fervent prayer, you are granted time to make your peace with God.’ Then, receiving no answer, she added rapidly: ‘You must leave to-night for Zarskœe Selœe or Gatchina. No one need

know. It will be said that indisposition, a slight cold, postpones to-morrow's review and next week's ball. You will be supposed still in St. Petersburg.'

'No.'

'You refuse? You dare not, you cannot refuse. Not I, not Helena Perowska, but She who is a saint in heaven kneels to you in my person, and implores you, by all you hold sacred, to listen to her prayer,' and, overcome by anxiety and excitement, the Countess stepped forwards, and fell at the feet of the man who had once worshipped at hers!

'No,' He said again, 'no, I am tired of it all; it must end. If this be in very truth the end, sooner or later it must have come; and, in sooth, it is late enough,' he added, as he assisted her to rise.

She knew of no appeal by which to urge him. Affection, a pale ghost whose very memory had passed away; Duty, a neglected deity returning in the form of an avenger; Religion, a thing of state-ceremonial and gorgeous trappings—all these were ineffectual to her purpose. One last and only argument remained. The very thought sickened all the Woman in her as she stood hesitating, but what

of that? If humiliation of hers might expiate the Past, should she refuse to drink the cup of humiliation to the very dregs?

'There are—others,' she said, the words coming in thin staccato gasps over her pale and trembling lips; 'she—they—helpless as they all are—love you, and for them, for their sakes, it is your duty to live.'

Her face was covered with shame and confusion, but she held her head resolutely aloft, determined to show no softness, to conquer Self to the uttermost.

'Helena!' he cried, and caught at her hand, but it fell passive, leaden-weighted, a dead thing from his grasp. 'Ah! the generosity of women confuses and kills me, shames and humiliates! My punishment is to be forgiven; my condemnation lies herein—that I cannot explain! But enough! I am weary of this life of degradation and confusions. I will not flee before my persecutors, or play hide-and-seek with my assassins. I thank you—more than I can say.'

'Farewell,' Helena answered. 'Were I to remain I could only repeat the same words. I implore you to reconsider them. I have no power to plead, but in Her name. Farewell!'

He made no effort to detain her ; he felt humbled by her very presence ; it heaped coals of fire on his head. Had she not declared that she stayed at the peril of her life ? And why prolong a scene of shame to himself, of danger to her, of humiliation to both of them ? It was better, since it had come to this, to let it end speedily.

With no more formal farewell than a wave of the hand, Helena drew her veil across her face, and with a beating heart flew down the great stone staircase, pursued by a thousand echoes, a chorus of vague voices buzzing in her ears, every corner peopled with shadowy presences, whose warning fingers added a mute horror to her flight.

Her faithful Ivan was waiting with a hired droschky in a neighbouring by-street, and, as he saw his mistress, he ran forward to meet her with a cry of relief.

‘It is I, my good friend,’ she said, seizing his arm ; the mere presence and contact of a faithful human affection reassured her. ‘I fear you have been anxious. All is well.’

‘Blessed be the saints, exalted mistress and little mother,’ said the white-haired Ivan, kissing Helena’s hand.

'The Count would dine with friends and go to the theatre; she was not to wait for or expect him,' was the message left for her on her return.

She was only too thankful to be alone.

For a few minutes after the Countess had left Him, the Emperor stood rooted to the spot, his gaze fixed blankly on the door by which she had disappeared. Then, as he realised all that the scene through which he had passed included, of bitterness, of humiliation, of reproach to him, he uttered a groan of despairing anguish! What lower depths of degradation could he know than this?—that the Woman, whose devoted love, whose faithful affection, whose daily companionship, he had sacrificed without remorse, should reappear upon the scene as an Angel of Mercy, as a Benefactress, a messenger from Heaven! Had she not declared that she risked her life for His? That life which, for years, had been devoted to his every whim, as to his highest interests, and that she was now ready to lay it down, a free-will offering, a voluntary sacrifice, to redeem him from Death?

He locked the door, and flung himself into a chair; poignant misery stabbed him to the

heart. He felt small in his own eyes ; poor, mean, lost, degraded ! His Empress-wife's devotion ; her delegate's magnanimous obedience, wounded him to the quick ; better Death with honour, than existence that could not be called Life, with threats, taunts, reproaches, humiliation, and execration !

As he sat musing, his hand shading his eyes from the light, Memory carried him back to a holiday trip, and conjured up an afternoon, spent in a foreign picture-gallery, where the idlers of fashion were wont to congregate, and where one canvas with horrible fascination, had arrested his attention, and imprinted itself upon his mental retina.

The Prætorian Guard had killed the reigning Cæsar and his family, sparing not even the members of Caligula's household, lest an Emperor should be thrust upon them by the Senate. The Palace, thrown open to the plebs, showed a perspective of blood-stained marble pavements, and blood-bedabbled hangings. Pools of ominous crimson and gory footprints traced alike the pursuers, and the flight of the pursued ; the murderers, and their victims. Only one of the Imperial family, Claudius, forgotten or overlooked, had survived the

general butchery; and the artist had chosen that moment, when the Prætorian Guard, anxious to verify their act of extermination, had returned to the Palace to discover Claudius, half imbecile with fear, half mad with horror, hiding behind a curtain, livid with terror, the one survivor of the Cæsars! To the bewilderment of the World, the Guard carried him off to their camp, on Mount Aventinus, and proclaimed him Emperor.

He was the first who had to pay the soldiers for his election.

It was the beginning of the End!

A monarch, even when least a monarch, and most a man, cannot cast off the tyranny of tradition, ignore the import of foregone conclusions, or deny the prestige of precedent.

It is one thing for the actual representative of a reigning dynasty to calmly review a long procession of crowned ancestry, whose learning, valour, or magnificence, have illustrated the Throne; to recall the kingly, soldierly, or saintly figures which, sublimated by the touch of Time, lie straight and still, settled now into stone, in niched recess, in carven shrine or gorgeous altar-tomb, mighty men of war, the heroes of an Augustan age, the giants of a

grand epoch, eloquent in dust, powerful in silence—flattering to a People's pride, secure of a nation's undying loyalty—it is one thing, whether as Man, or as Monarch, to cast a retrospective glance upon the title-page of his country's honour, emblazoned with Capability, Accomplishment, and Worth (such as human nature feels elevates all Humanity), and another to turn, with shuddering gaze, from the pictured crimes of kings and peoples, the dissolution and evanishment of Empires.

The hideous curtained background whereon, in ghastly accomplishment, the destiny of the Cæsars is fulfilled; the writhing victims of popular fury—slaughtered inmates of the Imperial household—the craven incapability, the gibberings of idiotic fear, the desertion of treacherous nobles, the supreme ruin and base betrayal, all expressed in the hideous leer of strangled Despotism, as with blood-shot eyes it falls beneath the Imperial purple, swept—mere carrion refuse—into the tangled obscurity of those guilty folds, trodden unheeded of the hurrying feet of the populace, ‘butchered to make a Roman holiday!’—and then cast unnamed, unknown, unhonoured, ‘unhouselled, disappointed, unannealed,’ as offal to the void!

Brute ignorance, having sated itself and waded deep in the blood of its rulers, reels out to revel with its peers in fresh orgies, whilst the welkin rings to the echo, and the mob salutes with senseless Aves—old, faithless, hollow cry—the new-crowned Deity of Change !

Such were the thoughts that came to Him as, in the silence and solitude of his own apartment, Alexander II. recalled the horrors of that ghastly pictured scene, and, reviewing the circumstances surrounding his own troubled Fate, arrived at a fixed resolution.

He would expiate, in his own person, the faults, the omissions, the shortcomings, and the faithlessness of the many. Since a Victim was necessary, and the cry and the clamour for blood could not be otherwise slaked or satisfied, let him be the expiatory Sacrifice, let him suffer immolation for the mistakes and the misdeeds of others ! They bade him ‘Beware the Ides of March,’ but if, as Louis XVI. said upon the scaffold, his death could make his country happy—he was willing to die. Only, there should be no fear or faltering, no hesitation or compromise ; Terror should not hunt him from the throne, nor Threats discrown him.

He would die—as he had lived—Cæsar !

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For long hours the unhappy woman, whose warnings had fallen, she feared, on a deaf ear, knelt before the *Ikön* of her patron saint, the Empress Helena, praying fervently for guidance, pity, and pardon. Then she drew a table towards her and wrote a few hurried lines on a sheet of paper. The writing was not disguised. Small precautions appear pitifully irksome to the tortured mind. Her letter ran as follows :—

‘By all that is dearest to you here and hereafter, by the memory of your mother’s kisses, by your hopes of heaven, in the name of duty, pity, mercy, love, prevent the One for whom you have sacrificed all others, from leaving your side to-morrow. To-morrow night go with him to a distant place of safety.—H——’ Then, summoning Ivan, she breathed her orders in his ear and so sat down to await the morrow.

Her letter was put into her sister’s hand just as she was on the point of dismissing her attendants for the night, and thus, in two distant Palaces, two sisters spent the hours of darkness on their knees, interceding with passionate pleadings for the august Victim, on whose account was held this Vigil of Death!

CHAPTER L.

NEMESIS.

SATURDAY night had passed into Sunday morning ere, wearied out by her long vigil, exhausted with a grief to which tears brought no relief, and reduced to a state of mental prostration that rendered her incapable of thought, Helena Perowska rose from her knees and staggered to her bed. She threw herself upon it without undressing, just as she returned from her fruitless expedition.

Her brain, wearied and worn out by the various and conflicting emotions through which she had passed, was no longer capable of thought; her mind refused to go backwards or forwards; prayer brought her no comfort; despair could not entirely rob her of all hope, yet suspense reigned supreme, and the reaction after the long tension, threatened, when once it set in, to be long and severe.

No tender soul had shared that awful vigil with her ; no kindly hand, with sympathetic touch, had removed her heavy, coarse black gown, helped her to rest, or smoothed the pillows of her cold and uneasy couch.

Her hair was damp and dishevelled ; her bright and beautiful face bedabbled with the stains of tears and the dye of her coarse disguise. No poor, lost, and wandering waif, crouching homeless beneath the chance shelter of bridge or archway, could look more desolate, neglected, and forlorn than she ! Yet her outer woman was but a faint symbol of the ruin and disaster within. The fair soul that had owned so fair a body was shattered, the 'silver cord loosed and the golden bowl broken.' Sleepless, yet only semi-conscious, too exhausted to remove the traces of her strange expedition or to lock away from the eyes of the maid (whose duty it would be to wake her in the morning) the evidence of her disguise, yet in some dim and distant way vaguely aware of the commonplace, prudential precautions which her overtaxed body and brain refused to fulfil, and tormented by the consciousness as of a duty neglected, the heart-broken lady had reached a point where volition ceased.

Through her troubled dreams the early Sunday chimes rang like distant memories of peace.

The maid whose duty brought her to her mistress's room, in time to call her for the morning Mass, shrank back anxious and terrified at the sight of Helena's strange condition ; it was as though, by her untimely intrusion, she had committed an indiscretion for which, later on, she would be reprimanded. Putting down the cup of tea and leaving the room still shrouded in the thick darkness of closed curtains and doubled windows, the frightened woman hastily withdrew.

It was well indeed for Helena Perowska's sanity, that mental and physical prostration wrought a merciful work, during the next few hours in that tortured soul and body, otherwise the unrelaxed strain of prolonged tension at such a crisis must have proved too much for the fragile frame.

So time passed, and the pale spring day reached its meridian, and the Sabbath hours that had waxed, began to wane.

In the outer world the faint sun arose, and men awoke to the sense of a day of Rest, of peace, of relaxation, of religious duties, of

home blessedness, or of idle amusement and pastime.

In most Continental cities the Sunday's military parade brings together large groups of idlers; substantial burghers with their families, young men with their fiancées, big children, attracted by the flash of steel and the glitter of gold, the waving plumes, the ringing spurs, the colour and the splendour of these men of war. The martial music, heralded from afar by the beating of drums, throbbing the air with distant blows, gathers civilian recruits as it advances, until at last half the city will be afoot, marching and countermarching to the sound of the military bands.

In many capitals of Europe these great weekly military parades are held in front of the royal palaces, and the ground where the spectacle takes place, is sure to be crowded with idle lookers-on and admiring citizens. But late events in Russia had rendered it undesirable that the open spaces of the city should be thus occupied by promiscuous crowds. The authorities had considered it wiser and safer (for the time being) to deprive the populace of their favourite spectacle, and consequently the Sunday parade had become rather a military in-

spection, professionally conducted, than a voluntary act of recognition and admiration on the part of the civil population for that ornamental section of the community, which illustrates the pomp and majesty of monarchs, the circumstance and prestige of their mighty men of war.

The Emperor, despite the warning he had received in Mellin's manifesto and Helena Perowska's unexpected visit; despite the prayers and entreaties of his fair young wife (with whom and their beautiful and blooming children it was his custom to breakfast on Sunday mornings), despite the ghastly vision of the previous night, had announced his intention of attending the usual Sunday parade at the St. Michael Riding School.

Unstrung by the ceaseless, never-lifting anxieties of the bygone cruel months, awed by the stern and determined replies that met her appeals, yet torn with doubt and distracted by terror, the mother of his children dared not be silent. Finding no arguments strong to shake him in his foregone determination, she at length drew Helena Perowska's note from her breast. 'I have not slept all night,' she said; 'for love of our children, for their sakes if not for mine, read this.'

He recognised the familiar handwriting and his brow darkened. It wounded his pride that he should be brought so low as to owe his life to one whom he had injured.

‘ Why this special terror to-day ? ’ he asked. ‘ Has not life been made up of threats and warnings for years past ? Have I held out so long to be intimidated at last ? Who knows, to be laughed at, degraded, and be-littled in my coward fears, by one of my own treacherous officials, perhaps, pointed at as a poltroon, and an imbecile ? ’

Time had been when, like his predecessors, the Emperor had loved to perambulate the streets of his capital disguised as a simple citizen, his adjutant in the dress of a man of the middle-class, following him at a distance, a faithful servant waiting with his one horse-droschky at the end of the street. Mixing with the crowd, he had learned the temper, whims, and weaknesses of the populace, their superstitious loyalty and boundless devotion ; and, a Haroun Al Raschid of the north, had turned his experiences to the account of philanthropy and enlightenment.

But the memory of those halcyon days only served to embitter the contrast of the

niggard and ungrateful present; a sore and angry sense of the heartless thanklessness of humanity had grown on his part into a stern determination not to quail before threats of violence and treachery. How often and how gladly would he have laid aside the burthen of State cares, and retired into that privacy where his shattered mind, and over-strained heart, might yet recover from the aching void left by the results of all these thankless years, during which, as he bitterly told himself, if he had reigned, he certainly had not governed!

Leaving Majesty alone, how could he consent, without loss of Manhood and of self-respect, to come down, and go out, at the behest of a rebellious and ungrateful mob? Not his people! His people, meaning that homogeneous mass of thirty-six millions, he believed to be still loyal. No! Let his people listen; let his subjects obey; and those concessions which he could not make to threats and insult, should gladly be made to loyalty, fidelity, and the orderly spirit of progress.

In the one case it would seem an act of cowardice and base desertion, in the other it would be an act of concession and sovereign grace.

As yet the Ides of March were not yet past. To-day was but the thirteenth of the month !

Thus, when somewhat later in the day, an old and tried friend, one of his faithful Generals, came to him, and despite the presence of the fair group by which his Master was surrounded, perhaps because of it, with tears of tenderness in his old eyes, and the quaver of love in his broken old voice, implored his revered Sovereign to listen to the warning of his faithful servants, the Ruler only laid a kindly hand upon the bent shoulder, affectionately pressing the broken form, to lend emphasis to the thanks his loyal solicitude drew forth ; then, buckling on his sword, he took up his shako, as it were to end an argument which began to importune Him.

The March day was veiled and grey ; the snow lay thick upon the ground ; the struggling sunbeams, pale and sickly, seemed to say that spring was yet far distant ; but the review was safely over ; and, accompanied by one of the Grand Dukes, on his return from the Rasvod the Emperor gave orders to take the way along the Catherine Canal, as he designed to pay a visit to the Grand Duchess Catherine Michaelovna before returning home.

The visit over, the Emperor had re-entered his carriage when suddenly, as the orderly procession advanced at a slow trot, some unseen hand cast a bomb from the garden of the Michael Palace at the Emperor's carriage. The shell, falling under the Imperial equipage, exploded with terrific force. The Circassian guard surrounding the carriage were flung from their horses to the ground, whilst the startled animals galloped wildly hither and thither amongst the alarmed foot passengers in riderless confusion.

The windows in the houses on the canal bank, the lamps in the garden of the Michael Palace, and those on the Kojushni Bridge, were shattered to atoms ; the horses in the Emperor's carriage were hurled to the ground, amidst confusion and consternation indescribable. In a few seconds the Emperor and the Grand Duke had struggled to their feet, and, extricating themselves from the *débris* of the carriage, they set a courageous example of calmness and presence of mind. Despite the imploring prayers of His old servant that He would at once proceed homewards, for—shattered though the carriage was, the coachman assured his Imperial Master he could manage to drive quickly to a

place of safety—the Emperor stopped to inquire of a poor wounded soldier, one of his Circassian body-guard, whether he were much hurt? That moment's delay was fatal. In his generous solicitude for others the Emperor forgot himself.

That humane impulse was his destruction.

The confusion and excitement all around seemed to have paralysed men's wits, whilst no one appeared able to realise what was actually taking place.

The Circassians of the guard were struggling with a man, who, believing that the Czar had escaped unhurt, was deliberately aiming a pistol at the Imperial head, when a second man, until then unobserved (standing in the gateway of the garden wall, he had been carefully noting the course of events), threw a second bomb. It exploded as it touched the ground, inflicting injuries of the most appalling nature on the Imperial victim.

The people, up to this moment bewildered by the confusion of the scene, now uttered cries of sympathy. Shouts of indignation, imprecations, and vows of vengeance resounded on all sides as the mutilated Emperor fell to the ground; the snow which was stained with his blood telling its own tragic tale.

No one knew, or could guess, how many conspirators might not be in the crowd which seemed so suddenly to have gathered in the quiet street ; but maddened by indignation, the populace joined the soldiery in securing the two men who had been seen to throw the missiles.

The Chief of the police, whose duty it always was to be in immediate attendance upon the Emperor, arrived at this moment in his sledge.

He had closely followed the Imperial carriage from the parade, but was almost blinded with the blood which was streaming from thirty or forty face wounds made by the splinters of broken glass caused by atmospheric concussion. Regardless of his own sufferings and of the obvious danger, the Chief of the police lifted his dying Master on to his own sledge, tenderly supporting his shattered limbs. The Emperor was conveyed, with the help of his sobbing servants, amidst the prayers and tears of his weeping and panic-stricken people to the Palace.

The scene of the disaster presented a spectacle of wild confusion ; besides the ostensible assassins a number of persons (supposed to

be implicated) were immediately arrested; some thirty or forty individuals who had been injured by the explosion of the bombs were conveyed to the hospital; a military *cordon* was drawn up, and no one was allowed to penetrate beyond a certain line of demarcation. Men and women, frantic with grief and terror, knelt in the snow, repeating aloud, amidst sobs and cries, prayers for the Emperor's life, whilst they stooped and kissed the blood-stains at their feet.

Several women, who could not give a satisfactory account of themselves, were hurried away from the fatal spot by the police.

It was commonly reported that Vera Zasulitch had been seen on the previous evening in St. Petersburg, and that hers had been the hand to throw the first bomb.

Meanwhile, all the efforts that skill and science could suggest had been made, in the vain hope that the Emperor might rally, but to no purpose.

Only one word, the name of his eldest son, passed his lips after the fatal occurrence.

The Czarewitch and the Czarevna, the Grand Duke Vladimir, and all the members of the Imperial family then in St. Petersburg, who

had hurried to the Winter Palace on the alarming summons, were present when, after two hours of appalling agony, the Emperor at last expired !

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In the distant Peroffsky Palace the grey light of the wintry afternoon had penetrated into Helena's silent rooms. The cautious maid had gently drawn up the blinds, and slightly opened the curtains of her mistress's bed-chamber, fearful lest this long, unnatural sleep should portend illness.

During the forenoon Bianca had called, and had left, with her love, a large bouquet of Russian violets, Helena's favourite flowers, and these the maid had placed, together with a small tea equipage, by her mistress's bedside.

Presently Helena moved. She felt bruised in body and spirit ; conscious through her weariness of some great trouble, that would have anon to be realised, faced, and lived through. Everyone who has known deep and intense sorrow, knows also, the anguish of these slow awakenings ; the tortures of returning consciousness, the exquisite misery of full realisation, the extent and hopelessness of vain grief, as the irreparable nature of the disaster

forces itself clearly on the mind. Slowly but surely, by faint and faltering steps along that cruel pilgrimage, we come at last to a full consciousness of the ruin and desolation, the final void that awaits us.

And so it was with Helena Perowska.

She had still a long life to live, she need not hurry back to premature despair. But as thought became concrete, and, one by one, the incidents of the last twenty-four hours dawned upon awakening memory, a ray of light shot suddenly athwart the universal gloom.

What if, after all, she should have been the means of saving that Life left as a dying legacy to her protection? What if the Present should expiate the Past and redeem the Future? Hope is not less a Christian virtue than faith and charity, and men ought not to faint but always to pray.

Hark ! what was that ?

From every dome, belfry, turret and cupola in St. Petersburg, from church and chapel and convent, the boom of bells, the clangour of brazen tongues, proclaiming their metallic message, each one clamouring to be heard, plangent, persistent, recurrent, relentless !

As she sprang from her couch, and with her

hands pressed to her throbbing temples, sought to control the anguish of her brain, the terrible truth, in all its awful portent, smote upon Helena Perowska's soul.

The city of the Czar was tolling the Emperor's death-knell; the Drama of Death was played out; the tragedy accomplished; fate fulfilled, and the awful story of Doom closed, for—Time must find its sequel in Eternity!

Within two hours of the moment He was first struck, on March 13, 1881, the Ruler of a vast Empire was summoned to render up an account of deeds done in the flesh.

To use the words of the Imperial ukase, published whilst as yet consternation petrified His people, the awe and horror of the tragedy smiting even indignation into Silence, 'It had pleased the Almighty to call the Czar Alexander Nicolaievitch, the Father of the Russian people, to Himself.'

CHAPTER LI.

A LITTLE BEFORE THE BREAK OF DAY.

BESIDE a bed in one of the prison hospitals a Sister of mercy knelt in the attitude of absorbed devotion.

The patient, pale, motionless, with eyes closed, gave no sign of life, yet it was evident that he still breathed.

Whether friend or foe, whether one of the chance passers-by, who had been injured by the explosion of the regicides' bombs, or whether he himself had cast one of the fatal missiles, or given the sign to cast, there was no one to testify. When brought into the hospital he had worn spectacles and a civilian dress of the usual bourgeois type, nor was anyone able to testify to any act of his, that might identify him with the assassins. His linen was unmarked, nor were any papers found upon his person to afford a clue, narrowly as the searchers

scrutinised every detail, before they finally laid him in the hospital bed.

As he had never breathed a syllable since the moment he had been found, stretched senseless on the pavement outside the Michael Palace garden, his very nationality was a mere matter of conjecture. There was a disposition amongst the hospital and prison officials to regard him as a foreigner; and it certainly seemed strange, if he had any friends or connections in St. Petersburg, that not so much as a card, a letter, or a chance scrap of paper, which might have afforded a clue, had been found upon him.

In answer to an advertisement, calling on persons whose friends were missing, to take an early opportunity of identifying them, hundreds visited the wards of the prison-hospital; but none recognised 'the gentleman in spectacles,' as he was called for want of a more explicit description, nor had he so much as unclosed his eyes for a single instant since his admittance. The state of his pulse might have led the intelligent young doctor in attendance to suppose his insensibility simulated; but who could say that some secret freemasonry had not already told the surgeon the true facts of the

case, and inoculated him with a convenient blindness.

More urgent cases absorbed so much attention, that both police and hospital officials paid comparatively little, to the 'gentleman in spectacles.' A few words to the Sister in charge, a young woman of the doctor's own choosing, gave the necessary medical directions, and even the *Ispravnik*, busied in persistently interrogating all such occupants of the hospital beds as had been brought in on the day of the explosion, thought this was a case that might very well stand for the present to the surgeon's care. Several soldiers of the Cossack guard had since died, and in the women's ward some severe cases made the detectives at once irritable and impatient, lest illness, and finally death, should seal the lips which might possibly be able to reveal so much, and allow the sufferers to carry down their secret to the grave with them, thus baffling the acute inquirers.

As Bianca knelt and prayed, or attempted to pray by Mellin's bedside, her petitions formed one long agonised appeal for a look of recognition, a word of love, a sign of farewell. She knew that he was dying of voluntary star-

vation as well as of his wounds, and she feared that his indomitable will would enable him to carry out the programme he had drawn up, so to steel himself that no temptation should lead him by word or sign to compromise his friends. She could not even be sure that he recognised her, or knew whose hand it was that cooled his throbbing brow, offered him drink, smoothed his pillows, administered, or strove to administer, his medicine. Her garb preserved her from any interrogations; in the fulfilment of her duties she had no occasion to exchange a word with anyone but the young doctor, and when she took her enforced rest, the probationer watching in her place, had orders to call her, if the patient so much as made a sign. In the women's ward, an agonising scene to which she was called, made her forget for a moment her own terrible troubles, whilst it revealed to Bianca the disastrous truth that Julie de Kerezoff had not only given herself up to justice, but had confessed that her hand had thrown one of the fatal explosives.

Since the consolations of religion were not denied the sick prisoners, it was no one's duty to interfere; and the black robed Sister, kneeling by the injured woman's bed, received her con-

fidences undisturbed, whilst she was supposed to be endeavouring, by gentle ministrations, to heal the patient's soul.

Reproachfully, Bianca asked her poor friend how she had come to such a pass as this act of insane folly betrayed? And poor Julie, dropping her habitual reticence, told without reserve the whole history of a tormented soul driven to the extremity of desperation.

Born and bred in Liberal ideas, the horror of her sister's fate had in early girlhood for a time turned the current of her blood and changed the bent of her nature, and when the Asylum doors opened to release the now sane patient, she took a vow never to forget the wrongs which she could only trust that time and circumstance might avenge. She had married in order to have sympathy and a helpmate in her designs. But by degrees her husband—good, easy man—had wearied of the whole thing; he was disgusted to find no home-peace, no domestic comfort; he was annoyed to see his means wasted, in what he had come to regard as a senseless fanaticism. He complained that his house and his children were neglected, and the excessive devotion to the memory of a sister-in-law whom he had never known, and

to a Cause with which he sympathised less and less as time went by, had brought about a complete estrangement between man and wife. Julie who adored her husband, who ardently desired his sympathy, yet who could not be, as she deemed it, 'faithless' to her sister's memory, was tormented by the hinted suspicions of Mellin and others, who, noting the marked coldness and indifference of Kerezoff, were prepared to see this sullen apathy degenerate eventually into treachery.

By Julie's desperate act she hoped to remove danger from his path.

He had not withheld her, and they would be obliged to acknowledge a debt of gratitude owing to him. For herself, the poor unhappy woman declared that she was tired of life; her death would leave a husband—whom she had not succeeded in making happy—free to choose a more congenial companion; one who, bound by no indissoluble bonds to the Past, pledged to no prior claims, would make his home cheerful and keep his hearth bright.

The natural melancholy of the Russian character would have seemed to make Resignation the logical result of her trouble; but the irritable, nervous temperament knows no such

gentle acquiescence ; and, to Julie, life had become unendurable. To save her friends from danger or disgrace, she too had given a feigned name, and in a long farewell letter to her husband she had implored him for their children's sake not to identify her.

As the tears streamed down Bianca's cheeks Julie lifted herself slightly on her elbow. 'Do not grieve for me,' she said ; 'I am in harmony with myself now ; all conflict is over. My wounds are slight, and if the shock does not kill me They '—with a significant gesture—'will not, for——' and a painful flush crimsoned her sallow cheek as she drew Bianca's face yet nearer to her own, and whispered such a secret in her ear as one woman may, in a moment of supreme confidence, repose in another.

Beyond Julie, in the last bed in the ward, lay a poor distraught creature, who called eagerly for some person to whom she could speak in her native language. Her cries, uttered in shrill French, drew Bianca to her side, and at the woman's urgent request she wrote (at her dictation) a sort of *résumé* or confession of her life. This paper, which the patient guarded with jealous suspicion, she hid under her pillow, until a young man coming to

see her, she made him enclose and direct it, desiring him to post it without fail to the address she had given him, on his way home.

Next day the woman's bed was empty. Before the Roman Catholic priest she demanded could come to her, she had died of her wounds, the end accelerated, so the doctor said, by the chronic state of alcoholism which had poisoned her blood.

CHAPTER LII.

‘ LARGE DESIRES, AND MOST UNCERTAIN ISSUES ! ’

It was fortunate for Bianca that her attention was thus drawn away from that one silent sufferer who possessed all her heart.

Immediately after the Catastrophe the young surgeon, Mellin’s friend, who told her the conditions upon which he would undertake to procure her admittance to the hospital, came to see her.

Religion is revered in Russia, in the garb of even the least of its ministrants ; and if the surgeons in attendance required the staff of nurses to be doubled, it was not likely that objection would be raised to their procuring assistants in the persons of holy women, wearing the customary garb of the sisters of mercy.

Using the formula of those affiliated to ‘ the Cause,’ Bianca solemnly promised to obey implicitly the young surgeon’s instructions. These

instructions were, in fact, Mellin's. Knowing every detail of the plot, he had foreseen exactly how events were likely to turn out. If it falsified his predictions—well, the thing would have to be gone through again. Weary of life, entangled in an engagement (out of which he saw no method of extricating himself at once effectually, and with honour), depressed by the divisions and innovations of a Party which was daily losing more and more of its likeness to that of which the original founders had been his personal friends; realising, not without bitterness of spirit, that new times require new men, and that the Future would afford no place for him, Mellin eagerly accepted the chance which now offered of devoting what remained of life to 'the Cause.'

He had lived for it, and could die for it. Very certainly he could live no other endurable life, least of all the life that seemed to be his inevitable portion, unless, by heroic measures, he asserted the right of Man to prove himself Master of his Fate!

Whether the supreme consummation he and his fellow-fanatics so ardently desired, or definitive defeat, were the result, the logical sequence of dumb, desperate conviction, required dumb,

desperate Action. 'Large desires' must needs have 'most uncertain issues,' but by the Issue, so he told himself, he was content to abide.

So, at least, he would not go out in obscurity and darkness, forgotten of all men, regretted of none; so, at least, he would set an example of consistent devotion and courage; so, at least, his name would live on men's lips, and he, who had led the life of a solitary and a seer, would become a distinct entity to thousands, far beyond the limits of contemporary humanity and of his own unhappy land; living amongst those who shared his beliefs, at least, upon the lips of posterity!

In Julie Kerezoff (with whom he had latterly been on terms of superficial antagonism) he found a ready sympathiser.

The devoted little woman, in her anxiety to remove all suspicion from her husband, persuaded Mellin that she had, or nearly had, obtained his permission to volunteer in this dangerous service. He was temporarily absent on a visit to Moscow, but she would none the less be ready when wanted. 'Why should I be less trusted than Irene Z——, Vera S——, Katinka M——?' she asked, naming several heroines of the propaganda, 'I, who have a thousand

reasons where they had one?' and thus, in secret sympathy, the surface estrangement melted away, and it ended by the world-weary Mellin taking Julie into his own private councils, thankful on Bianca's account that fate sent him one who was the friend of both.

He confessed, whilst recognising her good qualities, and not untouched by the generosity of the girl's love, that he was conscious of a repulsion towards her which shamed him by its ingratitude. Her ardent nature, her impulsive enthusiasms, grated upon and repelled him; and then—there were other reasons; and, in time the girl herself would come to recognise his motives and to thank him for sparing her bright young life.

For the first and only time in his existence, Mellin uttered Hero's name, with something like a break in the low monotone of his voice. 'I knew her, years ago, in England,' he said; 'she always seemed to me a companion for any man. But, wide as her sympathies were, her education had unfitted her for this. Though, for a moment at Sprudelheim I thought——'

Bianca, kneeling by the silent bedside, weeping and praying (as she had never wept or prayed in her life before) saw in Fancy the

unhappy Princess who, within her four palace walls, had at once realised all that love, wealth, power, and glory mean—and all that disaster, death, loss, and ruin comprise.

The mightiest of monarchs had died a thousand deaths in that agonised transit from the snow-trodden streets to the interior apartments of the Winter Palace, where the wail of the widow, and the sobs of the orphan went up to Heaven in helpless appeal, in a rapture of agony and grief such as mere words but faintly express.

Panic terror, the suddenness and awfulness of the tragedy, had paralysed the attendants' minds, and as His faithful Cossacks bore their beloved Master's mangled body—the shattered limbs unbound and every nerve racked with torture—not one of those who gazed upon the appalling spectacle realised the immensity of the result.

As the re-echoing foot-falls of that memorable martyr-march struck terror to the heart of the World, the blood of the most liberal ruler Russia ever knew, was destined to stain, step by step, with indelible traces, more than the snow of the capital!

Compared with the torture endured by their

august Victim, each sufferer in his hospital bed lay lapped in paradise; and long afterwards, when her mind by slow degrees recovered its natural powers, Bianca recalled the Revelation that had come to her during those hours of despairing vigil, the later light that was destined to shine out of the 'exceeding great darkness' of that night of terror and dismay.

Showing, on her part, a heroism not unworthy of Mellin's resolute suffering, Bianca abstained from breathing his name or her own. She refrained from gratifying her passionate desire for some token of recognition, by so much as the faintest touch or caress. What if, in bending over him, some term of endearment, barely breathed upon his consciousness, should reach the ever-vigilant eyes and ears by which they were surrounded? What if some act of imprudence, though never so trifling, should awaken suspicion, and her banishment, as the immediate result, leave him to die in loneliness at last? No! if he could, he would: she rested on this faith, not for a moment mentally admitting that he could, but would not!

His generosity, in refusing to compromise his friends, she thought worthy of him, and gloried in it. Had anyone told her the start-

ling tale of the satisfaction with which Mellin had contemplated getting rid of her, by means very similar to those which were now sending him out of the world, she would have admired him for the Brutus-like impartiality which prompted him to choose the victim (since victim there needs must be) near home.

Even now she could have envied Julie de Kerezoff; and a certain sense of jealousy gnawed at her heart at the thought that Julie, not herself, had been the chosen confidante of Mellin's last earthly acts, was actually the recipient of his last words and wishes.

Only it was well, she told herself, that her strong young life had been spared to minister to his; to save him, if possible, but if not, to wait beside his bed, to do the thousand little offices of love which tenderness performs for the sick; to watch the tide of life ebb, since it refused to flow; strong and helpful, and faithful to the last.

Mercifully for her, Bianca never doubted of her lover's love, and his attitude dispensed him from either proclaiming or disavowing it.

She who, in her blind enthusiasm and implicit faith, had never so much as asked whether he were a married man or not, who knew nothing of

his antecedents, family, or fortune (for aught she knew, he might be entangled in the meshes of half a dozen different obligations and relationships); she, who had been willing to accept him and his circumstances without so much as a mental question; she, who had learnt from his lips her first lessons in that larger humanity—which, to the disciple, leaves all narrower faiths so mean in scheme, so personal and poor of design, so petty of scope—she, who had wrested herself out of the dull trammels of middle-class everyday respectability to sit at the feet of this modern Gamaliel, and drink from his lips those weightier matters of a liberal law—to which selfishness is blind and deaf and dumb, and for which the self-seeking have no understanding—she, who had broken with her own nearest and dearest, and sacrificed Home and Country rather than betray a trust reposed in her by One whom she called 'great'; she, who had offered up her girlish vanities on the altar of the new gods of Progress, Enlightenment, Liberty, Equality, Science, and Humanity, stripping off her jewels, sacrificing her ornaments—happy to be able to give this proof of her earnestness, small though it might be, and inadequate both in motive and expression,

to the sublimity of the 'Cause';—she, who had preferred a life of dependence amongst strangers—so it realised unity of design, and community of purpose, with the man she loved—to independence, luxury, and idleness away from him; she, who was willing, if needs must, to wait and watch and listen for a sign, and yet, if he so willed, would at this supreme moment let him go, without so much as a whispered token of her love and devotion; she felt with a kind of strange exultation that she was alone with him! No one to dispute her rights, no one to overpower her claims, no one to plead authority over her, to drag her away from that room which to her included the whole World.

They were alone together—they two. And as the strange, fantastic shadows crept and flickered up the wall, and the city lay asleep, silently wrapped in its vast mantle of snow, it almost seemed to Bianca that the end of all things was at hand, and that Eternal Night would fitly close the twilight hush and deep sepulchral gloom.

It came, that dread Summons, that awful Message, on the morning of the fourth day, upon the stroke of dawn.

At the sound of the warning to render up

an account of all deeds done in the flesh, as though answering some invisible roll-call, Mellin suddenly reared himself in his bed, his right hand raised in token of response, his lips parted as in reply. His sightless eyes, unclosing for one brief moment, seemed to search the Unknown with eager questioning; then, as though dazzled, the ardent intensity of his gaze suffered eclipse, and with a sigh of profound satisfaction, as of labour ended, work fulfilled, duty done, he sank back once more into the attitude of profound repose, and had ceased to exist!

He died, as he had lived, a secret, self-contained, solitary, silent man; strong in the courage of his convictions. A visionary, a conspirator, a humanitarian, and a Regicide!—faithful unto death, in the firm belief that his life had been spent—as it was sacrificed—in a righteous Cause!

CHAPTER LIII.

NEWS FROM AFAR.

A YEAR had not yet elapsed since Graham left St. Petersburg.

There comes a period in the life of many men, and of some women, when, forced by circumstances to take stock of existence, they realise with crushing intensity that existence, for them, has in effect meant nothing but failure.

Looking back to the courage and aspirations of earlier years, when, despite the reverses of fortune, hope rose above defeat, and enterprise followed quickly upon disaster, and contrasting the spirit and temper of those times with the profound discouragement of these later days, the thoughtful man realises that he has reached a point which in happier lives means a gradual relinquishment of effort in favour of younger aspirants ; a daily increas-

ing appreciation of the blessings of a well-earned repose. In view of that which he had meant and intended, the sum of that which he has accomplished and attained, seems poor and pitiful ; for the greater the aim and the effort, the more evident must be the poverty of result. And if to men this phase of existence means acute suffering, what does it not include to women, who, having striven and hoped, and, as they believe, failed to achieve, see themselves relegated, at that moment of life when they most stand in need of sympathy, to solitude and neglect ? ‘ Too old,’ as Faust says, ‘ still to play ; too young to be without desire,’ they have lost the spring and hopefulness of youth, without having reached the repose of old age. They stand, rejected by the young, not yet enrolled amongst the old ; conscious of failure, and yet more conscious of the utter absence of hope. To others, as time has gone by, it has brought amelioration, fulfilment, compensation. To them it has brought nothing but a sense that all has been in vain, and that sustained effort has only meant prolonged reverses and repeated disappointment.

Happy the men and women who, dispensed from the necessity of effort, set courageous sail

on their life-journey, enjoying all ages, all climes, all experiences ; who find friends in every port, exchange greetings on all the *grandes routes*, and even gather passing entertainment from the by-ways of life ; who arrive in harbour at last, thankfully acknowledging the good-fellowship, the fair weather, the prosperous voyages they have enjoyed, and glad to find themselves at length safely anchored ‘in the haven where they fain would be !’

Such men and women have little idea of, and even less sympathy for, those to whom it has not been given to navigate their frail craft so prosperously across the sea of Life.

It is so easy, for those to the manner born, to be rich and prosperous and cheerful ; to have troops of friends, to gather smiling faces about them, to receive a tenfold interest on kind words, cheery looks, or generous deeds, if only they start fair, the favourites of Fortune ! But, to founder early in life on hidden breakers, as by a miracle to recover your mastery of compass and rudder, and steer your way, by sheer force of desperate will across the troubled waters ; to guide the helm, and weather the storm, and never lose sight of the course, these be things difficult to accomplish in com-

bination with casual 'becks and nods and wreathed smiles,' with pretty simulated sympathies for passing, frivolous disappointments.

For when a man's teeth are set in effort—his face hardened to endeavour, all the cordage of his heart creaks and strains, as he concentrates his energies in that supreme struggle, wherein he must either sink or swim!

Happy those men, and still happier those women, who, having reached the debateable land of middle life, can, notwithstanding past effort, and past failure, courageously face the future, in full assurance of a faithful hand to clasp their own, of faithful smiles commemorative of a time not all failure, of a faithful heart, which, having weathered the storms of life in common effort, brings an assured fidelity, a tender memory, and a contented acceptance of all things past and to come, wherewith to cheer the march downhill, which must begin now that the toiled-for summit has been reached!

To Graham, his chance encounter with the woman to whom he owed all the desolation of his life, seemed significant. It told him that, for him, the dream of happiness was vain; it told him of the years that were past, and it

showed him the years yet to come, whilst it convinced him that acquiescence in the Inevitable was all now left to him.

How, with the taint of this woman's presence still upon him, with the picture of her degradation present to his mind, with the memory of her words, her looks. her dress, her language, painfully clear, could he go into Hero's pure presence, and speak peace when there was no peace, and feign contentment, whilst sickening with despair ?

No ! Hero was probably, only as other women. In her daily life, with her music, her songs, her family, her duties, she had forgotten him ; or, if she remembered him, it was only in such a way as a gentle woman might remember a once dear friend—with a tender melancholy, a soft, not altogether unpleasing regret, that had nothing of the passionate extremes of violent grief or abiding anguish.

And yet, so little was there of the morbid in Graham's character, that, two hours after the receipt of the banker's packet, enclosing the letter ignorantly written by Bianca in the prison hospital, and directed by the faithful *friseur*, together with an official attestation of the death of ' Amelia Graham, âgée de 48 ans,

par suite de l'explosion du 13me, accélérée par l'état du sang de ladite défunte, he was on his way to London and to Hero, in whose hands the fortune of his life now lay, determined 'to put it to a touch, To win or lose it all !'

CHAPTER LIV.

A HURRIED JOURNEY.

THE Princess Paul Karishkin and the Countess Helena Perowska shared between them the anxiety and responsibility of Bianca's condition.

Brought, in a state bordering on insensibility, by the young doctor, to the first-named lady, Bianca, had by his orders, been at once laid in a well-warmed bed, and left to take that repose which exhausted Nature imperatively exacted. Both ladies were fully instructed of what had taken place, and both were full of sympathy for the desolate girl whose romance had terminated in so awful a tragedy.

But to several days of stupor, succeeded a state of alarming cerebral excitement, which called forth the doctor's most serious provisions. When, after hoping against hope, that the young and vigorous nature of his patient might help her to throw off the consequences

of prolonged mental strain, and to surmount the anguish of her loss, he was obliged to confess to himself that there was no longer ground for any such cheering anticipations, it suddenly dawned upon all concerned, that the delay in communicating with her friends might seem to them culpably like negligence.

Yet, how remedy the mistake? Bianca, always tenacious of any direct communication with her mother, had been absolutely silent as to her address. Russian servants, even if they had been entrusted with her letters, would not be able to read the direction, and Julie, the only person in any way instructed as to Bianca's home surroundings, could not be communicated with.

To these gentle ladies there was something very repugnant in the idea of examining Bianca's correspondence, and it was only in compliance with the doctor's positive commands, that they at last took the step of searching for her letters and communicating with her mother. All this caused considerable delay ; and, although Hero was growing anxious, a longer time than usual having elapsed since she last heard from her child, yet the news came upon her with all the severity of an unexpected shock.

Both ladies begged Hero would not think of setting out on so long and inclement a journey at that season of the year, since the doctor assured them she would not be allowed to see his patient, to whom, in her present state, any sudden surprise might prove fatal. They added that they would write every day, and they bade her be of good cheer, and hope for the best, since Bianca's youth and sound constitution were decidedly in her favour.

Thus Graham found Hero utterly unable to listen to his story or to give him the warm sympathy he so earnestly desired. She was insensible to 'everything but her child's condition; and whilst on the one hand, everyone opposed her setting out on a solitary journey, pity for the anguish which the separation cost her, prevailed.

Although she would not have confessed so much (even to herself), in the background of Hero's mind there was an ever-present dread. What if she should persist in her secret resolution, and arrive in St. Petersburg, only to find herself childless? How support such a blow amongst strangers? How face the horror of such possible desolation?

It was therefore with gratitude that she

eagerly accepted Graham's offer to accompany her. There were formalities to be attended to, connected with that official communication, which would take him to the City of Snow, and he intended to start at once. 'Only one thing need delay us for a few hours,' he said gravely. 'I have spoken to your father and to Fitz about it, and they agree with me; this matter regulated, we can leave directly,' and he laid the special license they had procured, upon the table beside her.

'Is this necessary?' Hero asked.

'I think it is. You would not like to shock the prejudices of these noble ladies, or to injure Bianca by seeming regardless of those "proprieties" to which foreigners attach so much importance. I know both ladies, and know how sweet and cordial will be the welcome that awaits you. Your position will be all the easier, through the fact of my being an old and familiar acquaintance of theirs, and they will take it, most probably, for granted that we have been married ever since I left St. Petersburg a year ago; nor shall anything in my conduct lead them to think otherwise. I know that your whole soul is set on Bianca, and I am content to stand aside, and wait until your

own kind heart impels you to recognise my claims. Had this not happened, I would have waited (though at our age and under the circumstances, such waiting would, I think, have been an act of useless folly) for a right to protect and help you until you felt disposed voluntarily to grant me the privileges I sought. But, as it is, I know I owe your acquiescence to circumstances alone, and I should be a brute if I took advantage of your misfortunes, to thrust myself or my presence needlessly upon you. But I think, Hero, that you know you can trust me. I go with you to help and comfort you, to make your position at once strong and independent—as your brother might; but I will not intrude upon your grief or claim a single thought for myself until your anxieties are at an end.’

Hero, who felt that he had divined the secret fear which alone had caused her to hesitate, before braving her father’s and Fitz’s opposition to and disapproval of her solitary journey, laid a grateful hand in his. ‘Let it be so,’ she said; ‘as early as possible, that we may be the sooner able to start.’

Fitz accompanied them on this strange bridal trip the first stage of the journey. He kissed

Hero's pale cheek, and shook hands heartily with Graham, when he left the train an hour's journey from town; then, coming back to the carriage window, he whispered in Hero's ear: 'Be of good cheer, cousin. Give her my love. Bring her back to us—well, if possible, if not, anyhow—bring her back!' Fitz also would not admit the possibility of loss, and Hero blessed him for his strong and hopeful words.

Whosoever has accomplished a journey of the kind, will realise Hero's thoughts as the train whirled her league after league across Europe, with nothing to relieve the monotony of an anxiety, that was only not despair, because she persisted in hoping against hope. As Graham sat opposite to this sad and silent woman—whom he had loved faithfully, if hopelessly, for so many dreary years—and noted the lines that Care had drawn in her fair face, his thoughts were all for her and not at all for himself. If he could soothe, support, and comfort her, that was all he desired; no single selfish wish came between her and the child in whose fate she was so completely absorbed, to whose bedside she was hurrying with such frantic haste. Once in St. Petersburg, she would take up her position by Bianca's pillow,

and devote herself to her convalescence ; or, if not—an alternative which to himself Graham was obliged to admit—why, who could show so much tenderness for her grief, respect her mourning so much, or be so patient with her despair, as he who had served long years for her, and would serve as long again without a murmur if needs must.

But, as by a miracle, Bianca was destined to recover. With the first days of early summer Hero and her child bade farewell to their kindly host and hostess, Graham paid his hotel bill, and the trio set forth on the first, slow stages of their homeward journey.

Some hours of cheerfulness had not been wanting, to cement the friendship which both the Princess Paul and the Countess Perowsky felt for Hero.

They had been delighted to find in Bianca's mother the wife of their old friend Mr. Graham. From them Hero chiefly learned the story of her child's disastrous love.

Bianca's lips were sealed.

One visit she paid, and only one, before leaving St. Petersburg. Her heart bled for Julie de Kerezoff. She found her sad, and yet utterly resigned. ' My name has never tran-

spired,' she said ; ' the Government is always merciful in such cases, glad to hide the names of persons, whose rank might seem to make them important enemies of the State. My children will never know that Katinka Chakoff' (the name she had adopted) ' was their mother.'

L'ENVOI.

HERO one day remarked to Graham that, the world, having so little patience with elderly lovers, it was fortunate that their friends had only made their acquaintance as Darby and Joan. And Graham, whose face was radiant with happiness, kissed his comely spouse upon her fair cheek, and said a heartfelt word of honest pride and happiness, such as it warms a woman's soul, whatever her age may be, to hear.

In truth, although happiness had come to them late in life, it had come to them very completely.

Mr. Owen's American adventures had scotched, if not killed, the passion for speculation in him ; and his own and his daughter's easy circumstances, afforded no excuse for the insane risks of earlier days. If he gambled a little on the sly, his stockbroker was a prudent man, and the old gentleman might have

lost the same amount at cards, without deriving anything like equally pleasurable excitement in the venture !

Graham's long years of industry (an industry that had been the means of keeping him from despair) enabled him to ask his friends to a pleasant house, and to enjoy life after the fashion that suited him best. Always affectionately disposed towards Bianca, her illness, her courage, the fact (which an accident had revealed) that hers was the hand which had conveyed to him the blessed news of his freedom, all these things, combined with the chivalrous feeling of a good man for a young and lovely girl, added tenderness and gratitude to his affection for her. Between father and mother the girl was fairly spoiled.

For Bianca had come out of her illness another person.

Courage and determination would always be hers ; but her rebellions were, for ever, at an end. Although she abstained from judging any of her former associates, and gave them full credit for pure motives and good intentions, she had come too near Crime not to feel the horror of the contact. Mellin's name never passed her lips, nor did her mother ever allude

to that episode which had nearly robbed her of her child.

Fitz, whose faith in her had been unwavering, who had pleaded for her when excuses had failed, was deeply touched on meeting the new Bianca.

In the grave, slender, silent young woman whose very smile was serious, and who never laughed, it was difficult to recognise the saucy, rebellious, impetuous girl of other days. In her new character he scarcely dared to approach her, and yet not a day passed but that in one way or another he showed how much, and how affectionately, she was in his thoughts.

More than once he spoke to Hero and Graham of his hopes and fears ; but their advice was still, that he should wait.

Bianca seemed as though she were expecting some news, some change ; so much was to be read in the expression of her eyes, in the inquiry of her attitude, in a constantly unsatisfied air of interrogation, for which not even her mother could account.

The explanation came one day with the news that Julie de Kerezoff, under her feigned name of Katinka Chakoff, had died in prison, in giving birth to a dead son.

‘She will be better now,’ said Hero. ‘She could accept no happiness, no joy, no pleasure with her old friend’s fate upon her mind, a prisoner, whose life was still in the balance.’

In her long talks, and longer silences, with Fitz, Bianca had learned the blessing of a delicate sympathy. There were things she would have hesitated to shock her mother with, which honesty obliged her to confess to him.

Thus, one day when sitting in the sunshine, her hands lying loosely and listlessly on her lap, Fitz struck with their extreme beauty, took one of hers in his, and looking at it, said: ‘I always knew your hands were beautiful, Bianca, but I never noticed before the perfect purity and innocence of their expression.’

‘And yet,’ she said, quickly withdrawing her slender fingers from his clasp, and holding them up, so that the sun shone through their pink transparence, ‘it is only by the merest chance that they were saved from blood-guiltiness!’

He guessed what she meant.

‘You would still have been innocent in my eyes,’ he said.

‘But not in my own—as I now see things,’ Bianca answered with a shudder; ‘that was a

terrible time, Fitz. I was mad. But, thank God,' holding her hand towards him, 'they are *not* blood-stained !' And she burst into tears.

Fitz stooped and kissed her little white fingers.

Love taught her to forget. Within six months of Julie's death, Fitz had won her consent to be his wife. Not even the sad story which she insisted on telling him, with all its mistakes and failure, could affect his determination. 'I always loved you and always believed in you,' he said, 'even when you treated me worst, even when I heard nothing of, or from you. And I only love you the better for all you have suffered, and for your candour in confessing the magnitude of your mistake.'

'Read this,' said Bianca to Hero, a month after her engagement ; it was a letter from the Princess Paul Karishkin.

'Khotineff.

'Martellina *mia* ! I am rejoiced to hear of your betrothal to your cousin. I always fall in love with all Englishmen—in novels—they dress so well ! My husband joins his congratulations to mine, and will perhaps add a post-script to this ; the children send their love. More substantial gifts follow. I have very

little news in the shape of gossip to give you. Our dear friend Helena Perowska has retired for life into the Borogoditzky convent of Our Lady of Kasan, and I have taken my last leave of this lovely and ill-fated woman. She is pursued by endless self-reproach, and I can only pray that in Religion she may find that consolation which the World denies. Esther Rodostamos you may perhaps see in England; but her fate, her fortune, her beauty, and her aspirations are all too superlative to be included within the limits of a letter. Tell your mother (who confessed to me that the celebrated *portrait en pied* had not been without its influence, as regards the *rigueurs* she made that poor Mr. Graham suffer), that the lord has been refused once more by the lady. His proposals come, like Christmas, an annual solemnity, and are as invariable as the fixed festivals. However, he got "No" for his answer. We live here *au jour le jour*. No one speaks politics; there is no Court and our Emperor is still uncrowned. Trade is at a stand-still; the shopkeepers are in despair; no one knows where the supreme Head is pillowed from night to night, and no one knows what may come next. Do not forget Russia, nor that you have many friends here.

Keep me in your kindly remembrance as I cherish you, and ever believe me, Bianca *mia*,

‘*la tua*

‘PAULINA.’

POSTSCRIPTUM.

‘My wife has already sent my congratulations on your approaching marriage, so I cannot grumble at the small space left for working-day topics. I know you love our unhappy country; and therefore, what little I venture to say on the subject next my heart, I flatter myself will interest you also. Our finance—that pulse of a Nation’s political prosperity—is in the most deplorable condition; the paper rouble not being worth half its nominal value; and, in spite of the official notice printed on the back, rouble notes cannot be exchanged at the Bank, either for silver or gold. We can only live in hopes, that the time will at length come, when the last blunder, if not the last crime, will have been perpetrated. A new departure will, then, be more in accordance with the spirit of those great political and social reforms imagined, and inaugurated by Alexander II., and Russia will be permitted to

develop her vast resources, and to resume the position she is entitled to occupy amongst the Nations.

‘I am very unhappy about my father. We do not know, at present, where he has thought well to take up his residence. The blindness, folly, and selfishness of the Nihilists, in not seeing that their line of action retards the very reforms for which they aver they clamour, and which they pretend to make their Watch-word, is incredible! They, far more than the retrograde sympathies of the Conservative party, ruin the Nation’s best hopes, whilst they impede all Progress. The quiet dignity of the true reformers, and enlightened Liberals, under ill-Fortune, is admirable; they wait, and hope. No such easy matter, for,—alas!—the army is disaffected, the navy tainted, the police ‘suspect,’ Society honeycombed, security undermined, official life disorganised, the Court dispersed, loyalty silenced, commerce at a stand-still, and Chaos—imminent!

‘Your faithful and devoted

‘P. P. KARISHKIN.’

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